## Chapter 12 - The Puerto Rican Experience Onscreen

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Puerto Rican film history is often studied in the context of its political relationship to the United States and its effects on Puerto Ricans’ already complicated cultural identity, both on the island and its diaspora. Puerto Ricans had been emigrating to the United States even during Spanish rule, with a surge occurring after the Spanish-American War in 1898 and another upon becoming US citizens in 1917 after the passing of the **Jones-Shafroth Act**, which further facilitated Puerto Ricans’ mobility between the two countries. A larger surge in the 1950s came to be known as the **Great Migration**, brought on as a result of the advent of air travel and a precarious economic situation on the island. Since then, Puerto Ricans are considered to engage in **circular migration**, moving back and forth between the archipelago and the US, settling primarily in urban centers along the east coast. These unique migratory flows also contribute to the ambivalent cultural identity Puerto Ricans hold, which at the moment could be considered to be simultaneously Latin American and Latinx. Although there was sporadic filmmaking on the island since the medium’s infancy, cinema in Puerto Rico would take a more defined shape as film production—or cultural production more broadly—became institutionalized in 1949 following the election of Luis Muñoz Marín, the first democratically elected governor of Puerto Rican descent in the island’s history and otherwise known as the figure responsible for ratifying the archipelago’s current status as a US territory. This imposed political status, along with its attendant unsettling of cultural identity, informs the majority of artistic practice on the island. This chapter will provide an introduction to Puerto Rican media from the advent of sound film to the present moment, focusing largely on cinema and related media, and exploring media-making on the island, in the United States, and in between.

The history of Puerto Rican cinema has experienced several upheavals in recent years. In 2017, the first feature length sound film made on the island was discovered after being lost for eighty years. *Romance tropical* (1934), directed by Juan Emilio Viguié Cajas, is at the moment, the earliest extant Puerto Rican film and its re-discovery has opened up new possibilities for the study of Puerto Rican media history. The locating and restoration of *Romance tropical* is an invaluable addition to the ongoing discourse surrounding Puerto Rico’s national cinema, or lack thereof, yet it also raises questions of ownership due to the complicated geopolitical relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, as it remains housed at the UCLA Film & Television Archive and there are no imminent plans for its repatriation ([UCLA Film & Television Archive](https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/blogs/archival-spaces/2017/11/10/romance-tropical-how-to-find-lost-film)). In terms of content, the film perpetuates certain imperialist and racist ideologies typically associated with the Unites States’ treatment of its unincorporated territories—a relationship of occupation, discrimination, and othering—as it allows a suspiciously white Puerto Rico to cast itself as metropolis, invading and plundering a different island populated by a Black and Indigeneous people that are portrayed as “uncivilized.” What is remarkable about *Romance tropical*’s narrative is the potential reading of Puerto Rico reimagined as a colonial power in the context of the tumultuous thirties, a time when its citizens were confronting the idea of a Puerto Rican identity as doubly colonized, with the centuries-long legacy of Spanish governance suddenly interrupted by continued US occupation.

<Fig. 12.1 here> *Bomba sequence from*Romance tropical*(Juan Emilio Viguié Cajas, 1934)*

Although the narrative never explicitly identifies Puerto Rico as the film’s setting, certain cultural markers reveal themselves in *Romance tropical*’s score and screenplay. The choice of music in particular may help place the listener in Puerto Rico, as both the score and the musical performances were originally composed by Rafael Muñoz, a prolific and well-known bandleader. There is clear inspiration from *danza*, a creolized ballroom dance genre, as well as *bomba*, a call-and-response genre born from the Afro-diaspora that functions as a percussive conversation between drummer and dancer (Figure 1). The differing ways these two musical styles are presented and utilized in the narrative further exemplify the anti-black nature of the production. Moreover, the script was written by Luis Palés Matos, considered a pioneer of Afro-Antillean poetry. On the page, Palés Matos’ skillful rhythmic verses can be appreciated in their original format, as experiments in poetic form, complete with a dose of regionalisms, latent musicality, and onomatopoeic flourishes, which is how his work has traditionally been performed. Onscreen, however, *Romance tropical* provides the spectator a full visual and sonic expression of the screenwriter’s flattening conception of both blackness and indigeneity. Discussions about the exploitation or outright fabrication of Afro-Puerto Rican culture have long accompanied Palés Matos’ literary work, yet what the film belatedly provides is an opportunity to pair an intellectual care for cultural specificity with concomitant attention paid to the specificity of film as a medium. Such a discussion about white supremacy in Puerto Rico and the politics of film preservation has not taken place in the eighty years during which *Romance tropical* was lost, but the film has since been a flashpoint in recent debates about Puerto Rican identity, cultural nationalism, and the limits of **mestizaje**. The intersections of race, class, empire, and culture—especially music—are crucial themes to keep in mind when studying Puerto Rico’s film heritage.

### The Division of Community Education (División de Educación de la Comunidad; DIVEDCO)

Local film production made in Puerto Rico by Puerto Ricans, such as in the case of *Romance tropical,* was sparse during the first half of the 20th century, but the midcentury period saw a rise in both public and private filmmaking ventures. Under the Muñoz Marín administration, the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) would begin instituting a series of reforms that shifted the island towards New Deal-style public investment while simultaneously allowing the US to gesture toward decolonization on the international stage. The most notorious of these reforms, named **Operation Bootstrap** (*Operación Manos a la Obra* in Spanish), was an initiative between the local and the United States federal government to transform the island’s economy from an agrarian system into an industrial one (Dávila 33-34). The creation of high-skilled jobs in urban manufacturing did not offset the sudden contraction of the agricultural sector, which triggered mass unemployment and led to another wave of economic migration to the United States in the 1950s and ‘60s. To ameliorate the effects of rural displacement and the rapid shocks to the island’s economy, the administration set their sights on combating underdevelopment through a new cultural pedagogy project. The **Division of Community Education** (**División de Educación de la Comunidad**; **DIVEDCO**) was formed in an attempt to educate the local populace on the topics of public health, economic self-sufficiency, the perils of consumerism, participation in liberal democracy, among other outreach to the poor and disenfranchised. As the cultural courier of the modernizing effort, the DIVEDCO’s mission became to cultivate—or rather, to consolidate—a cultural nationalism which rested on the idea of the Puerto Rican *jíbaro*(or peasant worker) as an idealized figure, to be seen in the factory just as in the fields.

After a change in Puerto Rico’s status to an **estado libre asociado**/**commonwealth** in 1952, the DIVEDCO became the cultural and educational front of this colossal political project, bringing in artists, writers, and general expertise from the mainland first to train the next generation of artists. Foreign-born artists such as Edwin Rosskam, Jack Delano, Irene Delano, Benjamin Doniger, and Willard Van Dyke, all of whom had experience with New Deal cultural programs, were brought in to oversee the formation of the DIVEDCO’s graphic, literature, and, ultimately, its film departments. Jack Delano’s [*Los peloteros*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FJf0qb7ZCk)(1951) is the first feature-length film produced by the DIVEDCO. Shot on location with a mostly non-professional cast, the film borrows its style from both Italian neorealism and Depression-era social documentaries to show how a group of young boys perform services around their neighborhood to raise funds to buy uniforms for their baseball team and how one man’s avarice threatens to undermine their collective action. Following in the tradition of films before it, Delano cast famous comedian Ramón Rivero (affectionately known as Diplo on the island), not as a hedge against the talent of the child actors, but instead as a way to showcase his considerable skill as a comedian and a musician. Delano, a photographer by trade, found in film a way to combine the ambitious, transdisciplinary artistic aims of the DIVEDCO by blending in other aspects of Puerto Rican culture—from scenes highlighting folk music and vernacular theater to images of stilt houses in the *campo* (countryside) and, yes, even baseball!

*Los peloteros’* formula of representing local culture and customs while couching social critique—in this case, nurturing a sense of solidarity within a community in the face of rampant poverty—within a fictionalized narrative became a blueprint for the DIVEDCO’s ensuing filmography, which would soon settle on the **docudrama** as its preferred mode. Artists such as Amílcar Tirado, Luis Maisonet, Marcos Betancourt, Ángel Rivera, and the Dominican-born Óscar Torres, to name a few, continued the DIVEDCO’s commitment to this social-democratic ethos by directing a series of films that addressed most aspects of the experience of living on the island during this time, from preparing for a hurricane to participating in elections. Although Puerto Rico had become a hub for filmmaking in the Caribbean during the 1950s and ‘60s in large part due to the Division, the cultural sector was the subject of budget cuts and deprioritized as policy following the electoral victory of the New Progressive Party in 1968. Running on a pro-statehood platform, the artists who comprised the DIVEDCO were seen as political opponents and their work considered a thinly veiled platform for the independence movement. While its graphic and theater divisions would remain, film production by the DIVEDO petered out in the ensuing decade before the film department proper was shuttered. Regardless, the catalog of social films produced by the DIVEDCO in the period between 1949 and 1968—many of which are readily accessible on the [Institute of Puerto Rican Culture’s YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLzlF-GHhEnGDMcVa8jYdh6bpLO8bYY6pD)—remains unmatched in both breadth and quality, and to this day is considered the foundation of Puerto Rico’s national cinema.

### The Emergence of a Transnational, Independent Cinema

Beginning in the early part of the 1960s—roughly coinciding with the rise of the New Progressive Party—the rate of publicly funded film production dwindled in Puerto Rico while competition from private studios and independent groups began to emerge. At the same time, the archipelago graduated from the dictums of developmentalism necessitated by the midcentury push towards industrialization and instead focused on incentivizing North American capital to invest in the island, overtures typically greased by federal tax incentives and subsidies. The promise of a modern Puerto Rico had arrived, culminating in an economic boom which peaked in the 1970s and is colloquially known as *La edad de oro*, the Puerto Rican “golden age.” With it, dreams of upward mobility into an idyllic upper-middle class began to materialize on the screen as Puerto Rico became a destination for film professionals from all corners of the hemisphere.

Foreign filmmakers such as the Mexicans Juan Orol, Ramón Pereda, Gilberto Martínez Solares, and Julián Soler; Argentinians Oscar Orzabal Quintana, Orestes Trucco, and Leopoldo Torre-Nilsson; and Spaniards Juan Fortuny and José Díaz Morales joined homegrown talents such as Amílcar Tirado, Tony Felton, Jacobo Morales, Jerónimo Mitchell Meléndez, and Luis Molina Casanova in directing comedies, crime films, domestic melodramas, and other genre features during this period, whose fuzzy boundaries overlap with the height of DIVEDCO productions in the late 50s and end with scattershot production in the late 80s and early 90s. Orol, known for his long career as a marginal figure of the Mexican Golden Age, directed a series of gangster films and comedies in Puerto Rico shortly before culminating his filmmaking career in the United States. Similarly, the emergent independent film industry in San Juan solicited the expertise of the Argentinian Oscar Orzabal Quintana, who produced films for the successful, if not brief commercial ventures of Probo Film Studios, the company which started this cycle of filmmaking on the back of the successes of *Maruja* (Orzabal Quintana, 1958), *El otro camino* (Orzabal Quintana, 1959), and *Ayer amargo* (Amílcar Tirado, 1960). Former DIVEDCO film professionals attempted to finance their independent ventures through a filmmakers’ cooperative or found work on the sets of emergent directorial talents such as Jerónimo Mitchell Meléndez, who leveraged a successful acting career abroad to become one of the most prolific Puerto Rican filmmakers of the 1960s. These features privileged the escapism and levity of Hollywood films, their main competitor, but they also signal a turn away from the nation-building, pedagogical project of their predecessor DIVEDCO, despite much of its talent successfully making the transition from the public agency to independent filmmaking. The turn to a style of filmmaking that proved successful at the box office while keeping hints of a distinctly local flavor is a reflection of the newfound freedom of leisure afforded to the rising middle class that developed during the economic boom of the period. The development of independent cinema within the bounds of the archipelago nevertheless failed to address a side effect of the “miracle” in Puerto Rico which facilitated the growth of a local film industry in the first place. Namely, a third intensification of out-migration to US urban centers as a result of a drastically contracted agricultural sector which emptied the country of dignified employment in rural areas. This latest exodus, in turn, spawned its own generation of grassroots and independent filmmaking chiefly in the barrios of New York City, one organized against the threats of gentrification, discrimination, and state violence in the metropolis.

<Fig. 12.2 here> *Still from*¡Pa'lante, Siempre Pa'lante!*(Iris Morales, 1996).*

In the late 1960s and ‘70s, the members of this wave of the diaspora came of age in a country racked by mass objection to an unpopular war in Vietnam and a crescendo in the interminable struggle for Black civil rights. As such, this generation of Nuyoricans, as Puerto Ricans who have resettled in New York are typically called, repudiated the static politics of their predecessors and resisted calls for assimilation in the face of blatant discrimination in health, housing, and education. The Nuyorican Movement, a collective of New York-based Puerto Rican artists, emerged out of poetry workshops and music clubs to address these deepening fractures in Puerto Rican identity and to cultivate an uneasy sense of belonging for the Boricua community living in the metropolis. During this time, the Young Lords chapter in New York City quickly took a more confrontational approach, affiliating with established organizations in New York City but also adopting a decidedly more militant stance toward the manifestations of US imperialism of the time, namely the US military incursions in Vietnam as well as the crushing of nationalist and independence movements in their unincorporated territories. The Young Lords adopted guerrilla filmmaking as one front of their media operations, producing newsreels on Puerto Rican history as well as the contemporary struggles of the Nuyorican community, many of which were broadcast on regional public television or were compiled into long-form documentaries later, such as in the case of Iris Morales’ *Pa’lante, siempre pa’lante* (1996, Figure 2). At the same time, a popular groundswell had developed at Hunter College at the City University of New York to found and foster a Puerto Rican Studies Center, and documentary film became an important tool through which students were able to garner support for their cause. While the films of this period were rudimentary in technique and appearance—no doubt a limitation imposed by a lack of access to financial and technological resources in the barrios—together they functioned to “assert that Puerto Ricans should occupy the center of cinematic discourse in order to reflect the variety of implicit and explicit responses to oppression” (Jiménez). For example, Ana María García’s *La operación* (1982), Edin Vélez’ video work from 1978 to 1989, Diego Echevarría’s *A Colony the American Way* (1981) and *Los Sures* (1984), or Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s *Brincando el charco* (1994) are standout films in this style, each treating the particularities of Puerto Ricanness through the lens of liberation. With their demands now in part institutionalized, organizations like the Nuyorican Movement, the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican Student Union, and other anti-imperialist and pro-independence groups laid the foundation for a thriving contingent of documentary filmmakers to emerge in the 1980s, one less concerned with taking their fight to the streets than giving voice to them.

### Breakthrough and the Contemporary Media Landscape

An opposite tendency was underway on the island during the 1980s and 1990s with the domestic melodramas of directors such as Marcos Zurinaga and Jacobo Morales. The latter’s film *Lo que le pasó a Santiago* (1989) was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film—which was renamed Best International Feature Film in 2020—at the 62nd Academy Awards in 1990, becoming the first and only Puerto Rican film to ever be nominated. The film follows Santiago, a grumpy, widowed, and recently retired accountant living in San Juan, bored of his uneventful life and frustrated with his children’s overly complicated lives—one a single mother going through a divorce, and one being treated for clinical depression (Figure 3). Nostalgic for the days before major tax incentives led to mass manufacturing and tourism on the island, he yearns for a slow life in the *campo*—it is no longer the Puerto Rico of the DIVEDCO films. Ultimately, the narrative expresses an affinity for an upper-class sensibility for Puerto Ricans of white Spanish descent—Afro-Puerto Ricans are notably missing from the story and the screen—whose families owned *haciendas* that were more often than not plantations. The main characters’ implicit rejection of the Americanization of the island and nostalgia for the days before major tax incentives led to mass manufacturing and tourism on the island exemplifies the lingering tension between empires and the lasting effects of the Spanish-American war, and subsequently the disparity in how this colonial entanglement affects different social classes and racial identities in the archipelago.

<Fig. 12.3 here> *Final scene from Jacobo Morales'*Lo que le pasó a Santiago *(1989)*.

After the film’s loss at the Academy Awards, concerns circulated amongst disgruntled fans of Puerto Rican cinema that the island’s status as a United States’ possession automatically placed it at a disadvantage as not domestic or foreign enough to compete fairly in any category. Previously, only Zurinaga had unsuccessfully submitted two of his works for consideration, and several filmmakers tried their luck after the *Lo que le pasó a Santiago* fluke to no avail. Yet it was not until 2011, with the disqualified submission of the film *America* (2011) by Sonia Fritz, that the Academy formally announced that they would not be considering US territories for the Best Foreign Language Film category, confirming long-standing suspicions of a competitive disadvantage ([El Nuevo Día](https://www.elnuevodia.com/entretenimiento/peliculas-series/notas/puerto-rico-queda-excluido-de-la-carrera-por-el-oscar/)). Morales, whose fantasies of a Puerto Rican gentry made him the most prolific and commercially successful director of the 1980s and 1990s, made films in the style and of the substance of a Sirkian melodrama to wide critical acclaim, yet even his magnum opus could not pierce the boundary that separates Puerto Rican artists at the margin from the academy’s movers and shakers at the center. This perceived sleight on the part of the academy, while a disappointment to the film’s producers, would have come as no surprise to their Nuyorican contemporaries. The incompatibility was no longer strictly about preserving a sense of national identity across a splintering nation, but about a divergent class consciousness in the filmmaking of this period.

In recent years, it is not uncommon to hear that Puerto Rico is experiencing another golden age in cinema. Films like *Broche de oro* (Raúl Marchand Sánchez, 2012), *Las vacas con gafas* (Alex Santiago Pérez, 2014), *Antes que cante el gallo* (Arí Maniel Cruz, 2016)*,* and *Perfume de gardenias* (Gisela Rosario, 2021)*,* to name just a few, certainly support that hypothesis. However, it would be insufficient to say that Puerto Rican mediamaking has thrived in the previous decade solely on the back of prestige, feature-length filmmaking. A wave of scathing social documentaries, often produced by activist-filmmakers, has emerged in response to three major events of the past decade: the enactment of a US federal law (PROMESA) which further undermined local autonomy and deployed a wave of austerity measures to ensure repayment of the island’s debt to boldholders, the manifold failures of US federal aid to Puerto Rico after Hurricane María in 2017, and the popular upswell which resulted in governor Ricky Rosselló’s ouster in the summer of 2019. Films such as *Seva Vive* (Francisco Serrano, 2008)*, Las Carpetas* (Maite Rivera Carbonell, 2011)*, The Last Colony* (Juan Agustín Márquez, 2015)*, Filiberto* (Freddie Marrero, 2017)*,* and *Landfall* (Cecilia Aldarondo, 2020)all tackle various aspects of Puerto Rico’s colonial history and present, criticizing the vestiges of bootstrap philosophies on the island and pulling no punches when it comes to denouncing forms of oppression from within and without. Lastly, screen media today is in the throes of a creative deregulation, whereby artists may move seamlessly between producing feature-length pictures, reggaeton music videos, and streaming shows, to name a few venues where one may find Puerto Rican cinema in the present moment.

Film in Puerto Rico and its diasporas has evolved beyond discourse of national cinema, revealing in its wake the inadequacy of both of those terms when applied to the case of Puerto Rico, a stateless nation without a robust cinematic tradition. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, mediamaking in Puerto Rico has been both supported by US-based resources while also conducted in opposition to American film culture, but only as a byproduct of the layered fiscal, political, and environmental crises has it attained its contemporary thematic coherence against the colonial imposition. The history of cinema in the Puerto Rican archipelago remains one of fits and starts, failed ventures, censorship, scarcity, marginalization, and wishful thinking. What recent events, such as the commitment to a cinema of denunciation or the archival misadventures of a film such as *Romance tropical,* ultimatelyreveal is that, forgoing the construction of a national cinematic canon as an ideal, cinema nevertheless remains the most incisive medium through which one may interrogate not only Puerto Rican history, but broader histories of U.S imperialism and its consequent disorientations and dislocations in moving images.

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