

Jesús Díaz Rewrites Cuban Exile

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No exile process exhibits as many radical turns as Cuban exile after 1959. Involving undoubtedly the most successful exiled community in history, Cuban exile has gone through so many stages and includes such complex processes that it resists, to this very day, its historization. There is, in fact, no history of Cuban exile that could be described as even ‘satisfactory’—perhaps because, among other reasons, it is still an ongoing process. The last of these radical turns—both clearly visible and ‘unofficial’—was the ‘legal’ exile of scholars and intellectuals from the onset of the Special Period, which coincided with the Rafters Crisis in the summer of 1994.

Jesús Díaz’s case is inscribed against this background. In the wake of the Cuban revolution, Díaz built his political and intellectual persona in terms of revolutionary values and premises, and would eventually become one of the most prominent figures of Cuban culture associated with the post 1959 era. Unpredictably—surprise is a frequent reaction when recalling the case—Jesús Díaz went into exile in Europe in 1992, where he stayed until his early death in 2002. Behind his decision was a public discussion with Fidel Castro around politics in the Special Period, which took form in the text “*Los anillos de la serpiente*” (“The coils of the Serpent”). I do not intend here to make a historiographical intervention into Cuban exile, a topic I have just depicted as extremely complex, but to reflect on the effect of Díaz’s displacement in the configuration of the Cuban intellectual field, always (and not only after 1959) the result of the interactions between the island and its outside. Neither will I focus, though I will briefly refer to it, on the most prominent feature of Díaz’s intellectual project: the launch, from Madrid, of the journal *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*; instead I will focus on his resolute concentration on the writing of narrative, especially his first novel from exile: *La piel y la máscara*, published in 1996.

I want to particularly focus on the way this novel metaphorizes the author's own transformation (and thus also the transformation of the collectivity which he has joined: that of Cuban exiles) from the actual condition of dislocation. Symbolically, this process is dominated by the figure of duplication, since *La piel y la máscara* is partially the novelization of the 1985 film Díaz had directed in Cuba: *Lejanía*, a work in which he reflected on Cuba's geographical, ideological, and political split. Thus, the writing of the novel is, strictly speaking, a rewriting, which suggests, on the one hand, what I will refer to as Díaz's "rewriting of Jesús Díaz" (following the characterization that best fits, in my understanding, his ideological turn: the figure of the "convert");¹ and, on the other hand, the rewriting of the relationship between Cuban exile as a historical phenomenon and the island itself.

This is certainly a privileged instance through which to closely study the material traces of exile displacement on textual configuration. Díaz contemplated both *Lejanía* and *La piel y la máscara* as very personal projects, and they both responded intimately to their particular circumstance of enunciation: respectively, Havana before the dismantling of the USSR, and Berlin after the fall of the wall. I want to argue that the result of contrasting the novel and the film is the textual materialization of a geographical and political dislocation.

I will focus on the three most obvious elements that derive from this contrast, each of them the result of the confluence between a series of circumstances that includes technical determinations, expressive possibilities, and a clear resolve to point up the interactions between the arts, official politics, and cultural industries. These three elements are: the "formal" metamorphosis of the text, not necessarily limited to the obvious passage from film to novel, but also entailing deep transformations in terms of poetics and rhetoric; the modifications in the level of the narrated story; and the widening in the novel of the field of narrativization to include the process of making the movie; the backstage of filming, so to speak.

The passage of the narrative format, from cinematographic to literary, is indeed the most evident transformation, and maybe the most productive in terms of its conceptual implications. It is in fact the inflection of a crucial move: the passage from the sphere of the state to the sphere of the market. Since Cuban cinema should be defined as national cinema, and since the Cuban state takes part in its production not only in the area of publicity or through the setting up of cultural policies and general guidelines for realization, but also through attitudes to supervision and the regulation of circulation, a film like *Lejanía* is a statement both by the man directly responsible for it and by the state itself—maybe even more by the latter than the former.

1. I owe this suggestion to Víctor Fowler.

To a great extent, the novelization of the film is nothing other than an attempt to recuperate the personal content in *Lejanía*, watered down in the larger undertaking, less critical and decidedly more institutional. By imposing a level of denunciation that is almost redundant, *La piel y la máscara* points to the evidence that the film became a personal project co-opted by the state. In showing how the movie would (and should) have been, the novel utters—elliptically, only through difference—the “state’s statement,” in a game that also has a decisive impact on the relationship between the context of enunciation (predominantly the spatial context but also the temporal one) and political analysis. Thus, the objects rendered for comparison multiply: the film, the novel, and the film figured in the novel; and the change in format turns into, above all else, a political statement: on individuality and on the decision to exit the sphere of the state.

If the conversion of the visual into the linguistic stands out as the most eloquent statement, the differences between the script of *Lejanía* and its novelization, at the level of the plot, give way to specific analyses of the results of the neutralization of the official voice. I want to address three issues here, all of them in close relation with the key components of both narrative structures, i.e. the figure of the author, and the symbolic protagonist couple: mother/son. These three elements are: the incorporation into the novel of a fictional first person, absent in the film; the “moral” turn of the character of the son; and the resignification of the role of exile in the character of the mother.

Regarding the first point, it was certainly worthwhile to modify, in the novel, the script of the film by way of incorporating a new central character, cipher of both the author and the director. It is, moreover, an addition that manifestly shows its fictional mode by unifying in one narrative space the director of the film, the actor of one of the key roles, and the central character in the story that is being filmed. The fictionalization of Jesús Díaz the director by Jesús Díaz the writer is also the reevaluation of Jesús Díaz the revolutionary intellectual by Jesús Díaz the exile, and should be read as the result of an alienation/distancing (à la Brecht) that presupposes the will to reassess his own political performance and his own aesthetic practice. In this sense, *La piel y la máscara* works to become a disclaimer of *Lejanía*’s failure in the artistic field.

The second point serves as the most pointed attack on the morals of the revolution: the son goes from the film’s rigid representation of him as a conflicted but still prototypical revolutionary who prevails over his disputes with his own personal past by retreating to the public duty imposed, once more, by the ethics emanating from the state, to its more human dimension in the novel, with his manifestly unexemplary behavior. It is clearly meant to exem-

plify the effects of censorship: the most prominent modification in the plot is the son's extra-marital sexual intercourse with his cousin from Miami, who has come to Havana with her aunt; while it appears as a successfully resisted temptation in the film, it turns into actual consummation in the film within the novel.

The third point is already within the scope of what I will analyze next: the incorporation of the process of film-making; and it openly stages the mechanics that dominate the relationship between Cuba and exile: the mother returns to the island for a short time, but the actress who plays the mother has plans to go into exile herself. Díaz uses the conflicts between an actress and her character—already alluded to by the title of the novel—to offer an explanation of the dynamics of desire and rejection that dominate, according to him, the severing of the Cuban national body into island and exile.

The film becomes a novel, its director becomes a character, pious militants turn into fleshly men, and national actresses into volunteers for exile. Díaz frames this radical transformation through the fictionalization of the creative process: a device for the representation of the dynamics of representation, and another level of reference for the title. This *mise en abyme* allows him to demonstrate the interaction between the individual and the official agencies of representation. If the film provides the scene for the resolution of private conflicts (achieved differently in the actual film than in the film within the novel), its “backstage” sets the scene for Díaz to rehearse the clash between individual will and state power which appears both in the national representativeness of *Lejanía* and the personal representativeness of the novel. This process of inclusions, on the other hand, allows him to show the dynamics by which the private is used by the public and vice versa, in order to make evident, for example, models for the ideological understanding of events like exile. By revealing official interference in the realization of the film, *La piel y la máscara* works to redeem *Lejanía* of its dogmatic content, and to separate it from its complicity with the present. Díaz confronts an ethical conflict which derives from being himself in a situation (exile) for which his own cultural production is in to some extent responsible. Such a paradox compels him to “rewrite himself,” especially in political terms, from exile, understood both in terms of space and time. His rewriting starts by rewriting his own text. Thus, unwriting *Lejanía* and restating its models of historical interpretation are for Díaz not only an ethical imperative, but also a vital necessity.

For this not to become an episode of schizophrenia, Jesús Díaz must at one and the same time rewrite his own past and validate his present, i.e. his absence from the island, as a political statement that does not necessarily erase his key principles, nor dismantle a life's aesthetic and theoretical schemes. Eventually, his efforts would result in an attempt to define and

materialize a third position in the Cuban cultural field, identified neither with the inflexibility of official politics on the island, nor with the sectarian agendas of the Miami exiles. This third position (only partially achieved by Díaz, since both sides would immediately work towards reestablishing the clear-cut polarization) was materialized in the project of the journal *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*, published in Madrid with the explicit aim of regrouping Cuba's diasporic intellectuals. Such an open, good-hearted, influential, and visible project is echoed in Díaz's narrative production only in *La piel y la máscara*. His subsequent novels—surprisingly more frequent after he left Cuba, probably in reaction to his sudden entry into the logic of a capitalist cultural market—do not correspond to this program, and become more and more dangerously caught up in Miami rhetoric. *La piel y la máscara* epitomizes one of the most brilliant examples of the effort to make some sense of the confrontation between Cuba and Cuban exiles. Díaz's failure not only confirms this irreconcilable opposition, but also signals the end of the usefulness of binary dynamics in articulating Cuba as a nation or as a culture. Without doubt, Díaz's failure has been not only the final—definitive—failure but also the starting point for a radical transformation of the models for approaching Cuban exile; these now disregard previous assumptions about geographical and ideological relations in tracing the map of Cuban culture.

