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## *Humor in Literature and Film of the Special Period<sup>1</sup>*

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Nancy Alonso's collection of short stories *Cerrado por reparación* was the recipient of the 2002 Alba de Céspedes Award for women fiction writers granted by the United Nations Fund for the Development of Women (UNIFEM), the Cuban Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC), and Casa de las Américas. The book is titled after the last short story included in the collection. This final story relates the tribulations of Ramón, head of the Departamento de Atención a la Población de la Dirección Provincial del Poder Popular de La Habana. The agency's mission is to receive complaints from the population and channel them to the appropriate State office for resolution. A year into his appointment at the agency, as Ramón is getting ready to submit to an inspection, he reflects on the Department's many accomplishments. The average time to put through a complaint has decreased from fifteen to eight days, and the margin of error in putting through those complaints reduced from 40 to 30 percent! There is only one glitch, though. The number of citizens who came back to the office to report the same problem more than once had noticeably increased, but Ramón, ever the optimist, saw this as an expression of confidence from individuals who entrusted them with their troubles. Needless to say, details about the report Ramón intends to present at the impending visit of the inspector are shot through with irony, an irony that intensifies as the story progresses. It is clear that the report is not to be taken at face value. To his dismay, Ramón realizes that only two of the agency's ten employees had come in on the day of the scheduled inspection, owing to chronic problems they themselves faced, ranging from lack of transportation and running water, to an accident due to a pothole and water leaks at home.

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1. The full title of this essay, "Strange Times That Weep With Laughing: Benign Humor in the Literature and Film of the Special Period," draws from a quotation from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, "Strange times, that weep with laughing, not with weeping," used also by Mathew Wilson in his article on black humor.

Adding to the irony is the fact that these are the problems featured in the preceding ten stories, problems that, as the reader well knows, have been anything but resolved. The plot, then, comes to a cul-de-sac that is worked out conclusively only when Ramón, ever the resourceful, vacates the office hanging a *cerrado por reparación* sign at the door. He will figure out later how to deal with the inspector.

The end of both the story and the book raises a question: What happens when the State offices that handle requests for vital renovation and refurbishment of all sorts are incapable of meeting those demands—perhaps because they too require a metaphorical overhaul? What is the average citizen left to do? These queries are not, of course, directly answered in the last story of *Cerrado por reparación*, but they appear as a subtext in the book as well as in the film *Lista de espera*, a comedy directed by Juan Carlos Tabío and released in 2000, and in short stories by other writers. They all address aspects of incompetence, scarcity, and inefficiency, simultaneously offering creative solutions to the myriad of no-exit situations encountered by the characters. This portrayal of a cross-section of Cuban reality exhibits a fair dose of bright humor, making these works, with their irreverent and sometimes transgressive—although not necessarily subversive—tone, even more appealing. It is the combination of positive criticism and humor in a time of crisis that sets them apart. While filmmakers in particular have used humor to highlight sore points in the system (think of Gutiérrez Alea's *Muerte de un burócrata* with its critique of bureaucracy or Tabío's *Se permute*, on the chronic lack of housing), it is now deployed in various ways to expose the unforgiving effects of the Special Period on Cuban minds and bodies. Logically, any attempt to probe these works would benefit from examining the function of humor in a literature grounded on a local, and at times surreal, reality that dwarfs the imagination.

In this paper, I will comment on the uses of humor in Alonso's stories and Tabío's film. I will highlight the critical function of humor in both works, while noticing its curative and benign nature. It is a humor that, although disapproving of the status quo, seeks to transform from within in an attempt to regain spaces for action in Cuban society, spaces that are taken over by what some critics would call "civil society" (Hernández). This type of humor offers clues about the thinking of socially committed intellectuals on the island today. Of course, not all of the literature using some sort of humor is as benevolent as the one examined here. For example, a story by Antonio José Ponte that begins with the words "Una mesa en La Habana" is followed by a most eloquent blank page (Ogden 42). Stories such as Ponte's adopt the "typical ambivalence" of black humor, reminding us of the "pain and misery

beneath what we are laughing at, which are not obviated by the laughter” (Wilson 37).

In approaching the upside-down world of so many Cubans today, Alonso and Tabío rely on some forms of humor that, at first sight, appear to overlap with traditional Cuban *choteo*, that quintessentially Cuban tendency to laugh at ourselves, making light of adverse circumstances. According to Victor Raskin, this self-disparaging humor is but the final stage in the evolution from primitive, ancient forms of humor, such as laughter elicited by the mishaps of others, to the “ability to laugh humorously at oneself” (22). The Cuban version of this type of humor is described, as we know, in Jorge Mañach’s seminal “Indagación del choteo,” originally a lecture delivered by the writer at the Institución Hispano-Cubana de Cultura in 1928. In his well-known essay, Mañach analyzes the Cuban national character at a time when intellectuals were questioning the stagnation brought about by a Republic that had failed to deliver on its promises of political autonomy and economic prosperity. Mañach took part in the most salient debates of his time, participating in the Protesta de los Trece (1923), the Grupo Minorista and the *Revista de Avance*, all committed to cultural and political renovation. In “Indagación” Mañach circumscribed his comments to the particularities of choteo in the Cuban society of the 1920s, in fact predicting its attenuation as a result of the anticipated strengthening of the social fabric. However, some of his observations could be extended to the Creole humor found in today’s literature and film, also products of a time of uncertainty, expectation, search, and hope. For example, we would be remiss not to notice how humor acts as “a subterfuge before authority” (Mañach 62), that it betrays “a state of impatience” (65) and “a relaxation of all ties and joints” that give things an appearance of articulation and smoothness (67) and, finally, that it doubles as a “descongestionador eficazísimo” (a most efficient escape valve) “that diminishes the importance of things by not letting them get the best of us” (85). Affording relief through distancing, this last mechanism is particularly effective in the kind of anxiety-provoking circumstances prevalent on the island since the onset of the Special Period.

The use of both Creole and universal forms of humor such as irony, satire, and the absurd as tools to carry out a critique of society is perhaps facilitated by the many changes taking place in Cuba since the 1990s. The editor-in-chief of UNEAC’s *Gaceta de Cuba*, Arturo Arango, on whose story the film *Lista de espera* is based, has remarked in one of his essays that cracks in the social and cultural landscape brought about by the Special Period produced a more unprejudiced and free literature including a diminished focus on self-censure (Espinosa Domínguez, “El sano hábito”). The publication of a number of incisive novels, among them Leonardo Padura’s *La novela de mi vida*,

with its pointed critique of authoritarianism, can be hailed as proof of a more open environment. The dialogue between the State and intellectuals is still admittedly “tense” or, as another Cuban writer describes it, characterized by “mutual suspicion” (Hernández 46), the result of decades of conflict between the two. However, according to Arango, after an initial period in the 90s when the State tried to woo the arts into a strategic alliance of resistance to a changed, post-Cold War world, the intellectual elite made up its mind to recuperate spaces where the “unequivocal expression of principles and intentions” is upheld (Arango, *Segundas reincidencias*, 91). Intellectuals have also identified alternative means of self-promotion no longer entirely dependent on State institutions, thus allowing for more autonomy. For Arango, among intellectuals

predominaba una conciencia libertaria, emancipatoria, y también nacionalista y crítica, que hizo falta para sostener la ideología misma de la revolución. En puridad, pienso que la intelectualidad cubana es hoy más revolucionaria que los políticos que intentan dirigirla. Y uso la palabra revolucionaria en un sentido profundo, verdadero, y no como calificativo de procesos históricos (“Entrevista con Arturo Arango”).

The writer refers to an apparent fissure between representatives of the State and intellectuals and, by extension, other civil segments of the population, symbolically, but also remarkably mirrored in the literature and film under discussion here. This is not to say that the writers and artists authoring this kind of work adopt an oppositional stance; rather, their gestures and propositions are seemingly directed to effecting certain crucial changes within the current scheme. One indication is that the humor is not of the corrosive or resentful type; instead, as the Spanish playwright Miguel Mihura would argue, its function is to show “por dónde cojean las cosas; comprender que todo tiene un revés, que todas las cosas pueden ser de otra manera, sin querer por ello que dejen de ser tal como son...” (305). In these works humor is used as a corrective to flawed, or “hobbling”, situations. Raskin calls it “the loser’s humor par excellence, with the help of which he gets back at the winner.” Raskin adds that the latter is generally someone who is “responsible for denying the loser something he needs [such as] political freedoms” (23). However, he at once notes that this form of humor “requires a modicum of freedom, a certain unhealthy combination of repression and some possibility to laugh at it and still get away with it” (23).<sup>2</sup> Finally, the atmosphere of tolerance to which Arango (as well as Raskin, in more general terms) refers “coincidió, a su vez, con una creciente curiosidad por lo que estaba ocurriendo en ese país tan singular llamado Cuba.” All of these changes have produced a

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2. The same critic points out that unlike the Stalin years, the comparatively more tolerant Khrushchev government in the Soviet Union gave rise to numerous political jokes.

burst of publications (not to mention the launching of first-rate journals such as *Temas* signaling an artistic revitalization after the cultural slumber of the early 1990s (“Entrevista con Arturo Arango”).

Nancy Alonso would agree with Arango not only about the curiosity Cuba inspires, but about the singularity of the island as well. She has observed “las cosas pequeñas y familiares, las humildes cosas que están en torno nuestro” cited by Mañach in his essay and made them part of her stories—as Vitalina Alfonso notes in her review of Alonso’s book. In addition to Alfonso’s, favorable reviews of *Cerrado por reparación* have appeared in both *La Gaceta de Cuba* and the Madrid-based *Encuentro de la cultura cubana*—two journals on different sides of the ideological divide. At least one critic has read the book as a “metáfora polivalente e irónica de la vida en la Cuba de hoy” (Costa 271). The narratives are woven around everyday problems that, as Carlos Espinosa has written in his review of Alonso’s collection, *Franz Kafka en Luyanó*, draw heavily from the literature of the absurd, for daily life and the survival strategies it generates are best approached from an aesthetic of the absurd. The absurd rises from situations experienced by ordinary citizens in their attempt to cope with a chaotic infrastructure and the extreme material need that is widespread on the island, as well as from the bewildering remedies applied to those situations. It stands out all the more due to the colloquial language and conversational tone employed throughout the book to refer to the quotidian, in addition to the conventional structure of the short stories. Their formal elements bring to the fore the incongruity of the situations depicted therein.

In an illustrative story, “Historia de un bache,” the female protagonist reports to the Popular Power delegate in her neighborhood a pothole caused by broken water pipes outside her home. However, as the delegate acknowledges, there is not much hope the pothole will be filled, or if it is, that it will happen any time soon, as there is a backlog of more pressing problems to attend to. So she takes it upon herself to complain to an ever-widening circle of agencies to no avail until, two years later, she notices that a tiny *flamboyán* is growing in the middle of the pothole. At that point, she makes up her mind to grow a community garden. Thus ends the story of a pothole that through the narrative gains catastrophic proportions—as Espinosa also remarks—going from *el bache* (pothole) to *el hueco* (hole) to *el foso* (pit) to a hyperbolic *la furnia* (abyss, chasm).

Interestingly, the character turned the situation to her own advantage even though she failed at correcting the problem she had set out to fix. In this as well as other stories, such as “Motín a bordo” and “Una visita informal,” the characters come through with flying colors, each devising their own tactics to dupe or manipulate an unjust and abusive *modus operandi*. In the first of

these two stories, the female chronicler is waiting for a bus to Cojímar along with a host of other characters. When the bus approaches, a dozen so-called employees of the transit system come out of nowhere to board the vehicle before any of the anonymous passengers who, sensing the injustice, storm through the front door and take over the bus. The driver, enraged, refuses to budge. An impasse ensues, with the two sides arguing their case. The setting serves to display the entrepreneurship of individuals turned street merchants who pass by selling their home-made goods, as well as a repertoire of characters who engage in small talk. Thus adorned with even snippets of conversation, the vignette resembles a “cuadro de costumbres” that offers a glimpse into the social interaction that takes place in public spaces. Police officers intervene to resolve the conflict, and after hearing the evidence reported by the passengers’ designated spokespeople, representatives of “different sectors of society” (49), scold the driver, ordering him to move on.

The characters in these stories must navigate the system, negotiating within a defective or dysfunctional structure that they cannot or will not escape, but they manage to keep their dignity. If there is an attempt to pass judgment on the existing state of affairs, it is done through the mere exposure of present circumstances. Nonetheless, Alonso’s characters make the best of their circumstances. And they are aware of the collective dimensions of the crisis. It is not just individual characters (although some of the stories do focus on individual conundrums) that are out to “resolver” (to use a word of high frequency in Cuban idiolect today), but a collective entity, a nascent civil society, that forges ahead, occupying whatever spaces there are at their disposal and offering resistance, however symbolically, to the *status quo*.

It is the latent spirit of this collective entity that animates the rundown bus station converted into a paradisiacal garden in *Lista de espera*. The script of this light comedy loaded with intertextual references is by Arturo Arango and Tabío in collaboration with Senel Paz. Paz and Tabío had previously collaborated with Gutiérrez Alea in *Fresa y chocolate*. As in his previous work, Tabío assumes, like other film directors following trailblazer Gutiérrez Alea, the role of “social critic” (Chanan 51). This more recent film is based on a story with the same title included in Arango’s book of short stories *La Habana elegante* (1995). The film stays close to the underlying thrust of the story, at the same time enriching it with satire, comedy, and allegorical allusions. After briefly summarizing the story, I will address each of these aspects of humor in the paragraphs below.

At the plot level, the film *Lista de espera* revolves around the lack of public transportation and its consequences among would-be passengers who, at an unnamed location somewhere in the middle of the island, are waiting for buses to Havana and Santiago. After the only bus available at the station

breaks down and they lose all hope of leaving soon, a group of passengers led by a young engineer decide to take matters into their own hands, successfully taking over the station. While trying to repair the bus, they begin to fix up their surroundings and tend to a subsistence garden. Over time, the characters' active involvement in the improvised community would seem to have eliminated most, if not all, of the difficulties that the passengers faced at the beginning. When a bus passing by with a vacant seat stops to pick up a passenger, no one wants to leave. At the end, however, it becomes apparent that it has been nothing but a dream, a flight of the imagination shared by all of them while dozing away that first night at the station. Once they wake up in the shabby station the following morning, the dream dissolves and they go their separate ways. Most of the narrative time is devoted to the action within the collective dream, for this is the main interest.

To be sure, the dream illustrates what a group of determined, civic-minded individuals can attain when they are left to their own devices instead of waiting for handouts from a paternalistic State. Deeply implicated in a communal life project, they begin to craft their own destiny, unhindered by the odds. The odds in this case are represented by a key character, a dogmatic, rigid man who slavishly insists on following orders, on not stepping out of established boundaries. By all standards a parody of dogmatism and therefore narrow-mindedness, this character cringes every time an initiative is taken, threatening to report the defying citizens, and even the station administrator who goes along with their plan, to the proper authorities. After leaving the station, we see him returning with functionaries at the end to make good on his threat. By stripping this character of every trait except his intolerance, the filmmakers turn him into an object of derision and ridicule. He is far from being the exemplary Party militant one would expect to encounter in a socialist society that until recently aspired to create a "new man." When addressing the category of political humor, Raskin writes that "the opposition between the script for what [a particular leader or political figure, a political group, its ideas, or the entire way of life] are supposed to be and the script for what they actually are [constitutes] the opposition which forms the joke" (222). This opposition is at the basis of the satiric scenes in the film.

The conflict between these two forces—innovative and regressive—reverberates with Arango's remarks with regard to the revolutionary (in a deep sense) breadth of Cuban literature today as well as the existing tension vis-à-vis a sector of the political elite. The writer has acknowledged in one of his essays that the road toward the completion of *Lista de espera* was anything but smooth due to the corrupted revolutionary zeal of some officials:

Cuando escribía el guión para la película *Lista de espera* un amigo me dijo que no debía esperar dificultad alguna de carácter ideológico para su aprobación, porque la historia constituye una defensa candorosa de la solidaridad entre los seres humanos y, en última instancia, del socialismo. Estuve de acuerdo con mi amigo, pero le advertí que tenía la percepción de que algunos dirigentes estaban más empeñados en defender su parcela de poder que la ideología. El azaroso camino que atravesó la aprobación del guión de *Lista de espera* confirmó mis prevenciones (*Segundas reincidencias* 29).

In addition to this political dimension that determines a “bumpy road” resulting more from an abuse of power than ideological disagreement, the obstacles to achieving the utopian commune also come from within the group, embodied in two comic characters that go to great lengths in order to survive. One of them is an unrepentant hoarder who, despite the expressions of solidarity all around him, hangs on to his selfishness—and his large cardboard box filled with cans of food—throughout the film. No contributor to the commune, he ends up being marginalized. The other comic character, nicely played by Jorge Perogurría, feigns blindness in an attempt to get ahead on the waiting list for the bus. This picaresque character plays some of the most memorable comic scenes, as he is able to sustain his masquerade in front of the other characters while winking an eye to the audience. A black market profiteer, he is carrying a load of lobsters to Havana, but decides to donate them to the commune before they spoil. Perhaps because he too contributes to the common good with his skills as a mechanic, at the end he is unmasked but forgiven, and embraced as a member of the group. Evidently, there are degrees of impropriety applied to the ethics of everyday life under the Special Period. A third challenge to achieving a better society within the national context is flight, either by leaving the country or by retreating into the private sphere. Escaping the harsh reality—the film suggests—is the equivalent of turning your back on a possible collective project of renewal. The film shuns evasion and the ideology of “every man for himself” in favor of an ethos of engagement and solidarity.

Finally, the allegorical overtones of this film are conveyed by way of the dialogue that takes place at the bus station. Albeit disconnected from one another, phrases like “Aquí las guaguas no entran ni paran,” and “[Estamos] tratando de irnos a algún lugar,” while the lack of “piezas de repuesto [que ya no llegan] de Rusia o los Estados Unidos,” a reminder of the “double blockade,” makes the going difficult, these phrases, I posit, point to the allegorical domain. Others like “Esto no está fundido” and “Con nuestras manos podemos construir un mundo mejor,” outline a world of possibilities for a nation—for this is where I think the allegory is pointing—mired in a multifaceted *período especial*, but longing for a brighter future. Revolving around

the binary being trapped/being able to move forward, these enunciations elicit a knowing smile in the viewer, who is drawn in to empathize with the film's grounding. The public is invited to agree with its set of practices and beliefs, which creates by default a hierarchical structure within a value-laden field. This gesture to nudge in a certain direction parallels the dynamics embedded in the rhetoric of irony as described by Wayne Booth. As he remarks, irony dramatizes the choice of the reader (in this case, the viewer) to accept or reject a given proposition.

To a national audience, the film also calls forth an active engagement with the reality in which Cubans are immersed, taking as a point of departure the conditions resulting from the immediate past. In this respect, they resonate with Martínez Heredia's reflections on the Special Period, which, although lengthy, are worth citing:

In the face of the kind of economic determinism that advises us to sit and wait—in effect, a philosophy of surrender to capitalism—the Cuban option is *to begin from the realities in which we live in order to force them to give better results than what can be expected from their simple reproduction*. This is possible only through conscious, organized actions that mobilize the social forces we can still count on, their interests, their ideals, and their project. A national identity that does not renounce the heritage of the past decades but that is capable of revising itself from within, without lies or cover-ups, would be an extraordinary force, because of the profound anchorage that identity has in the people and because of its capacity to lift us above narrow interests to prefigure utopias and to summon us to give a more transcendent sense to life and to the search for well-being and happiness (147). (Emphasis on the original)

The works discussed, and clear statements that appear in various interviews and essays, lead me to believe that a number of intellectuals—though surely not all—are committed to the project described by Martínez Heredia.

Does *Lista de espera* suggest that for the time being the only option left is dreaming—dreaming in Cuban? The film strongly hints that the act of dreaming proper has an impact on reality and behavior as well as on the intangible realm of the imagination. When the bus in which he is at long last traveling stops for a break and there is yet another line to endure, this time in front of a cafeteria, the “blind” character picks up his dark glasses and stick, ready to put on his show. But after observing the people in the line, he hesitates and finally cannot muster enough courage to go through with it. Meanwhile, an open ending is constructed around the character of the young engineer who, at a different station, meets another woman. These characters, somewhat transformed by the oneiric experience, will likely continue to pursue the

dream. The film thus expands the limits of the imaginable while advancing new parameters for agency, intervention, and ultimately empowerment.

Besides dreaming of a better future, Cuban writers and filmmakers sketch in their works other options—for instance, to transmute their surreal reality into fiction even while confronting it. In considering this option we have come full circle, for this is what the end of the clever first story of *Cerrado por reparación* insinuates: that the writer, after leaving her house to look for a working public phone in the city, a hopeless errand amidst the generalized decay, collects and rewrites the stories that follow. Casting light on the spectacle of the here and now in a comic mode, these stories will remain as fine examples of the cultural production on the island over the last decade. Their stimulus originates in a complex society that—paraphrasing Shakespeare—weeps with laughing, not with weeping, in these sad, uncertain, and challenging times.

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