



## Article

# Tourist Trap: Cuba as a Microcosm

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**Abstract:** Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who called tourism an industry “whose production is identical to its advertisement”, also wrote about the pitfalls of what he called the “tourism of the revolution” that flourished between the world wars in Soviet Russia. This essay combines both perspectives in a discussion of the experience of making a film about ecology in Cuba in 2019, *Cuba: Living Between Hurricanes*, which includes a section on the tourist industry. Informed by the perspectives of autoethnography and phenomenology, the author explores the cognitive dissonance of the filmmaker’s ambiguous relationship, as a professional tourist, to the contradictions of the tourist industry as refracted through the small coastal town of Caibarién on the north coast where Hurricane Irma made landfall in 2017.

**Keywords:** tourism; Cuba; travel; globalisation; hospitality; eco-tourism; documentary

In the same way that the collapse of just-in-time supply lines when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020 was a signal of the vulnerability of the transport system of the globalised economy, so too did the globalised infrastructure of personal travel bring the collapse of tourism. Tourism is a paradoxical word, both metaphor and metonym. As metaphor, the word connotes a multitude of reasons for travel which populate the advertisements—typically as holiday, time out, recreation, discovery, exploration, pilgrimage, and so forth, reasons which obscure a host of personal motivations such as family visits and professional purposes, like academic conferences, not to mention business travel. The truth is, of course, that you can be more than one type of tourist simultaneously. As a metonym, the word serves as an umbrella term for a diffuse industry—travel operators by land, sea, and air, agencies, IT networks, hoteliers, restaurateurs, tour firms, souvenirs, and more—that in global terms was reckoned in 2018 to be worth almost USD 9 trillion, or around ten percent of global GDP, supporting 319 million jobs, or 10 percent of global employment (D’Eramo 2021, chap. 1). The commodity it trades on is equally diffuse; it is not a physical object but an intangible experience, an imaginary product suitably wrapped and served up in the form of a local habitation and a destination. We might, therefore, think of tourism as a paradigmatic instance of what Fredric Jameson called the process of sheer commodification by which commodity fetishism penetrates the imagination and the psyche (Jameson 1984).

One such destination is Cuba, where the response to COVID-19 was extraordinary. Cut off from access to vaccines developed by Big Pharma, but with its own biotech industry, a small country near the bottom of the indices of development produced its own vaccine and achieved one of the proportionately lowest rates of illness and death on the planet. There was nothing they could do, however, about the sudden loss of tourism, which in the new millennium had become one of their major sources of foreign income. Substituting for the lost commodity market for sugar, tourism in the most recent decade came to account for as much as 40 percent of Cuba’s foreign earnings. The country has been caught in a trap which epitomises the contradictions not just of tourism but of the global crisis of the twenty-first century. This much I already knew when I visited there in 2019 (this was forty years after my first visit) to shoot a documentary on the island’s ecological history, *Cuba: Living Between Hurricanes*, which includes a sequence on tourism as the latest commodity frontier.<sup>1</sup> Before homing in on the particular conjuncture on the Communist island represented in this film,



**Citation:** Chanan, Michael. 2023.

Tourist Trap: Cuba as a Microcosm.

*Humanities* 12: 91. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12050091>

Received: 21 April 2023

Revised: 20 July 2023

Accepted: 17 August 2023

Published: 29 August 2023



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however, let me step back and consider how the tourist value-system evolved, and how I understand my place within it as a filmmaker and academic—a professional tourist who never fails to enjoy travelling for its own sake.

The origins of tourism are various and well known, including the Grand Tour designed for the education and pleasure of the young nobility of the 17th century, and even older, religious pilgrimage. The former depended on the sumptuary expenditure of the privileged; the latter, not designed to be comfortable, created a trade in relics and mementos which anticipates the paraphernalia of modern tourism. Other precursors appear towards the end of the eighteenth century in the form of traveller's guides, covering the Grand Tour in Europe, which in North America responded not to tourism but to migration and the colonisation of the interior of the country. Although such guides, and the illustrated maps accompanying them, encouraged travel for the sake of travel, it was not until the opening of the first transcontinental railway in 1869 that a more modern tourist industry developed (Akerman 2022). The model was Europe, where railways arrived three decades earlier and the growth of the bourgeoisie brought the rise of the spa and the resort, quickly followed by the first tourist guides, the first organised excursions, guided tours, the concept of sightseeing, and the modern hotel, all within a few decades. Sightseeing, a neologism coined in 1847, two years after the first trip organised by Thomas Cook, becomes the paradigmatic element; it places the whole business under the sign of spectacle, and these developments benefitted from and exploited the growth of photography, the postcard, and the illustrated press to configure an appropriate iconography; it also served to establish the credentials of adventurous photographers and pioneer reporters (one of whom was Mark Twain) who went abroad to explore the fascination of the exotic. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger has said, tourism is an industry “whose production is identical to its advertisement” (Enzensberger 1996). What Enzensberger called the consciousness industry, with which tourism is intertwined, was inexorably attracted to the construction of an imaginary, and it is hardly surprising that it turns up in early cinema in the form of the travelogue, then winds its way through the entire history of cinema and television and now populates the web.

There are different ways of approaching this history. Enzensberger is essayistic and synoptic. Marco D'Eramo, in a recent book to which this essay is much indebted, merges history and cultural analysis (D'Eramo 2021). The travel writer, who is focused not on history, as such, but its present day appearance, uses literary licence to mix historical titbits with observation and subjectivity in a genre of writing that itself becomes part of the history of its subject. The academic scholar is faced with the problem that tourism studies is not a stand-alone discipline but a field that finds its tools elsewhere, in geography, economics, sociology, anthropology, or that other interdisciplinary field called cultural studies. Is there room under this umbrella for the phenomenological experience of the individual subject, the reflexivity of personal experience? Call it autoethnography of the writer's own encounter with travel as part of the ecosystem of modern life. Is there anyone who writes about tourism who has not also participated in it themselves, even if, as scholar, they dissociate the experience from their exposition of the problematic to be analysed? For the present writer, the two are intertwined in the profession of the documentary filmmaker, who travels abroad as a special kind of tourist with the mission of the witness. They are also intertwined autobiographically as a coming to consciousness which began in childhood. This experiential narrative starts with a child growing up in postwar London, when travelling was what you did to go on holiday to the seaside, at home or abroad. Everyone had summer holidays; not everyone went abroad, but, of course, as a child of the *petit bourgeoisie*, I didn't know that this had to do with class, and we never went on package holidays. Seaside holidays at home meant driving or travelling by train, but when we went abroad, we drove to Dover, left the car in a garage, and took the ferry to Belgium or France, ending up in Knokke or Le Touquet, staying in a seafront hotel. One of these trips, when I was seven or so, is preserved in a home movie, taken by my older brother after he acquired an 8 mm camera as a birthday present; this only confirms what other

writers have said about the imbrication of tourism and amateur picture taking. Tourists also carry cameras *de rigueur*, to serve as evidence of being there (however, they do not all become filmmakers, as my brother also did before me).

The first inkling I had of being a tourist rather than just going on holiday was when I was eleven and we went by train to Italy, where we spent a week at the seaside and then went to Bologna and Florence, where we visited the Uffizi and other tourist sites (I have a particular memory of looking up in awe at Michelangelo's David). But this was also the first time that I had the experience of being bound up in the journey itself, which took us south from Paris, across the Alps, then down the coast of the Gulf of Genoa to our seaside destination. Before that, I regarded travelling as what you did to get somewhere, full of anticipation and promise but not for its own sake; on this occasion, I hardly slept and can pretty much reconstruct a mental image of the succession of landscapes we passed through, though this is enhanced by many subsequent trips. Thinking back, I can see the experience of the eleven-year-old as the source of a schoolboy interest in geography, and, more importantly, an incipient desire to travel in order to discover the world and, by implication, my place within it. If travelling to discover yourself was a common trope in the imaginary of the postwar generation I belonged to, the first to discover cheap air travel in the 1960s, it also involved a valorisation of travel and disparagement of mere tourism, which is not only a sometimes dubious distinction much debated in the literature, but also, from the perspective of the tourist industry, beside the point, except in relation to the way that advertising is targeted, and what means of transport and accommodation you employ.

Rail travel was obviously an essential component in the history of the tourist industry, and rail operators responded by catering to its needs and introducing differentiated services, emphasising the comfort of the journey and its scenic beauties. The experience of the journey is mediated by the contrast between the speed of the train and the stationary position of the passenger inside looking out, protected from the elements and relieved of paying attention to the approaching path of travel, which is outside their field of view. A simulation of the experience was provided by one of the curiosities of early cinema known as Hale's Tours, a reinvention of the precinematic panorama in which spectators sitting in a stationary railway passenger car saw backprojected travelling scenes through the window to the accompaniment of sound effects or the lecture of the train conductor (this contraption enjoyed a vogue for a couple of years around 1904–1906, but the same instinct surfaced fifty years later in the shape of Cinerama, another short-lived spectacle which I was taken to see when I was about seven, in which the image is made up of three synchronised projectors on a wide curving screen in a specially adapted cinema, and whose staple fare was the travelogue. So too, more recently, with Imax). The real traveller, of course, doesn't have to watch the scenery going by, you can read or play video games, but it remains in the periphery of your vision, and produces a nonbodily sense of movement, or rather, of being moved, but not as enclosed and palpable as in a motor vehicle. In an airplane, however, where the windows are small, there is no sense of being a body in motion but more like floating, because there's nothing to see unless you have a window seat and crane your neck, and then it's far below, hardly recognisable, except when taking off and landing, which are strange phases of transition from the ground to the skies and back again. The first time I travelled by air, when I was seventeen and my parents sent me on a trip to Israel, the part of the experience of flying that remained with me was the long descent returning to England—I had a window seat—and the almost shocking contrast between the aridity of the Mediterranean summer and the green and pleasant land unfolding below.

Arrival somewhere by air is being thrown back into life at ground level, but you can't just walk out onto the street any more than on leaving you can walk off the street onto the airplane. First, you have to be processed, which means passing through security and identity controls, being directed through gates, down corridors, through shopping arcades, and along passageways, whose architecture is identical throughout the world. A nonplace. All this becomes part of the business of being a traveller-cum-tourist in the age of cheap air travel and comprises a costly infrastructure out of which private enterprise makes a good

deal of money and large numbers of people are employed in the provision of services (I think of a relative who lost her job at Heathrow when the pandemic hit). This infrastructure is being continually revamped. I cannot remember when I last arrived at an airport where some part of the installation was not undergoing reconstruction. Anyone who has taken to the air either regularly or at intervals over recent decades is aware that regulations are also susceptible to change. In other words, present practices have a history, in fact several histories, most of them forgotten. The passport, for example, a word which entered the vocabulary in the sixteenth century, has a long prehistory as a safe conduct but was not generally required for international travel until after the First World War, when the League of Nations agreed on standardisation. Passports grant passage and assert nationality, but not all nationalities are equal—this is a question of geopolitics—and besides, there are millions of people without them who are stateless refugees; they are not proper citizens. Meanwhile, because passports are also related to the exercise of biopower, they have been redesigned to interface with computerised security databanks.

Not all tourism is international, of course, and international tourists are far outnumbered by domestic tourism, whose growth was highly uneven even in the most developed countries, its extension down the social scale a function (as D'Eramo recounts) of the grant of paid annual holidays beyond the most privileged employees. In France, for example, the practice was extended to civil servants in 1858 but not to all workers until 1936. Meanwhile, in Germany, 66 percent of private-sector employees had paid leave by as early as 1908, while in Britain most people had no paid holidays except bank holidays, and the first legislation on the matter in 1938 fell far short of the French. This variability reflects differences in the battles between labour and capital in each country and is in turn reflected in the development of different forms and styles of domestic tourism, inflected by the predilections of local popular cultures, from day trips and organised campsites to holiday camps and seaside bed-and-breakfasts. Only when everyone could enjoy paid holidays did travelling abroad become a possibility for the masses, says D'Eramo, and as a result, the global tourist revolution is a postwar phenomenon. It can be traced first in the matter of numbers, measured in international tourist arrivals. Between 1950 and 1992, international tourism grew at an annual rate of 7.2 percent; in the decade from 1980 to 1990, the annual growth rate was 9.2 percent, much higher than the growth rate in world trade as a whole. In 1950, 25 million; in 2019, 1465 million. It can also be seen in the diversification of destinations. In 1950, the top fifteen destinations accounted for 98 percent of international arrivals; in 1970, this had fallen to 75 percent, and in 2007, to 57 percent. D'Eramo calls it "a monstrous tide that we are all part of at some point" (D'Eramo 2021, p. 25). That would certainly apply to anyone likely to be reading his book (or this essay), but this is a "we" that also excludes billions, mostly in the Global South.

Tourism developed by expanding its clientele and differentiating both its tariffs and its mode of appeal. D'Eramo considers their variety: city tourism, sun-and-sand holidays, business tourism, conference and convention tourism, winter tourism, festival tourism, gastronomic/culinary tourism, cruise tourism, elderly tourism, sports tourism, religious tourism, and medical tourism, not to mention sex tourism. The latest category to be added to this list is ecotourism. Most of them can nowadays be found in Cuba. They all share the same infrastructure, with the addition of specialist operators, but construct different cognitive maps in the mind of the punter in which the places are real—they can nowadays be located on Google Maps—but the ways of moving around them are coded and channelled into imaginary scenarios. Cognitive mapping, a term originating in the work of the behavioural psychologist Edward Tolman to describe the way that rats learn their way around a maze, enters the discourse of cultural studies in the work of Fredric Jameson, as the mode whereby the individual subject situates themselves within the vaster, unrepresentable totality of the city; hence, all cognitive maps are relative, they inscribe relationships between places on familiar itineraries interspersed with uncharted territory, no-go areas like the spaces on ancient maps marked "Here be dragons". On this reading, the difference between the tourist and the traveller is that the latter assumes responsibility

for their own itinerary and their cognitive map is their own, rather than designed by someone else. And it is always a work in progress; in a city you don't know, you cannot move around with the same instinct as on your home turf, so you explore. But perhaps the difference between the tourist and the traveller is one of disposition, and the tourist lacks the traveller's desire for discovery (and self-discovery).

For myself, I was still a tourist when I spent two months in the summer of 1971 visiting four different foreign cities, one after the other, all except one for the first time. First was Mexico, then New York, then back through London to Bucharest and, finally, Tel Aviv. The varied motivations for these destinations represent some of the variety of reasons for travel among any planeload of passengers, which are all subsumed under the word tourism. Mexico for a holiday with a girlfriend; New York to attend a family wedding, but that was an excuse to go there and experience its unique vibes for myself; Bucharest for my first academic conference; Tel Aviv to visit family. The experience of this two months of travelling did much more than expand my geographical coordinates. It took me through the Three Worlds in the space of two months: Third World, first; then the heart of First World empire; then on to the Second World of Communism; and, last, a country that I realised to be straddling First World and Third. Full of contrasts I registered but barely understood, it was a summer that transformed my entire cognitive map of the world and began to transform my understanding of my place within it. It also affirmed an appetite for travel which I would later satisfy as both a documentarist and an academic. In the wider scheme of things, I was the beneficiary of the cheap air travel which was gifted to the postwar generation I belonged to just as we were coming of age and whose arrival was, in retrospect, like an advance warning of globalisation.

From this perspective, the discovery of what globalisation means is the history of the present. An unknowable totality in which, however, it is possible to distinguish certain driving forces. There is, first, the double action of politics and technology. On the one hand, the neoliberal transformation of geographical relations through the push and pull of economic interrelationships governed by deregulated capital; on the other, the abstraction and dissolution of terrestrial space by digital technology. Both forces are met with countercurrents. The sense of the global is matched by the sense of the national, and both are contested by the local but in an unequal relationship. This is where tourism comes in. The ideological function fulfilled by tourism is to reproduce this inequality in the very structure of its economic exploitation of the local, while disguising it, dressing it up, reconstructing it to conform to an image of itself, a simulacrum, ending up in the absurd hyperreality exemplified by Disneyland, which is another kind of nonplace.

The other main aspect is the environment, beginning with the most obvious aspects of pollution, like the deadly dirty yellow smog I remember from my childhood, but which only began to rise up the agenda during the 1980s as new scientific findings emerged. The issues were disregarded by the scientific ignorance of both the political class and the media. It took the first (and only) British prime minister with a scientific education to focus public attention on it when Mrs Thatcher addressed the Royal Society in 1988 and told the scientists gathered to hear her that the planet was in serious trouble (which many of them already knew). She spoke about agriculture and fertilisers which left pollution from nitrates behind them, and of huge increases in methane. She spoke of the vast increase in carbon dioxide released by land and air transport just as forests which help absorb it are being cut down. She talked about the greenhouse effect and of changes in atmospheric chemistry, warning that a warming of 1 °C per decade would be too much for the natural habitat to cope. A year later, it was the UN General Assembly that heard her warnings on 8 November 1989. The next day the Berlin Wall came down, her call for international action was eclipsed, and the world turned.

Thatcher, of course, saw the solution in growth and technological progress, and appealed to the multinationals to take the long view, warning that "there will be no profit or satisfaction for anyone if pollution continues to destroy our planet". Three years later, Fidel Castro told the Rio Earth Summit that the atrocious destruction of the environment

was due to the consumerism of the rich countries whose imperialist policies engendered the backwardness and poverty that today plague the vast majority of humanity. “They have poisoned the seas and rivers, they have polluted the air, weakened and perforated the ozone layer, saturated the atmosphere with gases that alter the climatic conditions with catastrophic effects that we are already beginning to suffer. Forests disappear, deserts spread, billions of tons of fertile land end up every year in the sea. Numerous species become extinct. Population pressure and poverty lead to desperate efforts to survive even at the expense of nature. It is not possible to blame this on the countries of the Third World, colonies yesterday, nations exploited and sacked today by an unjust world economic order.”<sup>2</sup>

Tourism, of course, continued unabated, and the flows of traffic diversified as emerging middle classes in former colonial countries claimed their freedom to travel on international airlines competing for their custom.

Cuba became the focus of my attention in 1979, first as a film critic studying Cuban cinema, then making documentaries for television, and I became, I suppose, what Enzensberger called a tourist of the revolution. There was little tourism in Cuba at that time. The Revolution had put a stop to the unsavoury flow of tourists from the USA who came for gambling, drugs, and prostitution (see *The Godfather Part II* 1974). Individual tourism was not impossible, though uncommon, and the country only began to open up again in the mid-1970s, but growth was slow. There were still less than half a million tourists visiting Cuba in 1985, including those from other Communist countries; by the eve of the pandemic, this was approaching five million. At the start of the 1980s, not many people travelled there from the UK at all, and it was relatively difficult to get to—there were no direct flights and it was not a popular holiday destination. That does not mean that there were no other kinds of tourists and visitors. On the contrary, Cuba became a magnet for the new left and hosted visits by sympathetic writers, artists, and intellectuals from around the world, sometimes in high-profile events like the Cultural Congress of 1968. The operative word here is “hosted”—Cuba operated the *delegatsia* system that, as Enzensberger recounts in another essay, was invented by the Russians in the 1920s when foreign travel in the country was both difficult and risky. The delegate, alone or in a group, is invited, does not normally pay their own expenses, “and is therefore under the aegis of the unwritten laws of hospitality” (Enzensberger 1996). They are cared for by an organisation—in my case, the film institute, ICAIC. You are looked after by a minder, “a personal guide who functions as translator, nanny, and watchdog” and thereby mediates the delegate’s contact with the social reality. On my first visit, I was driven around, taken out to restaurants, and for a weekend at the seaside, with a cabaret show thrown in. Groups organised by fraternal Communist Parties or trades unions were looked after by the international friendship organisation—another Russian invention—who conducted the tours and shepherded the group around with almost as much panache as Thomas Cook’s (the tourist coaches were air-conditioned).

The hospitality is real but you’re living a privileged existence, which inevitably colours the experience, for good or ill. Enzensberger gives examples of both from among visitors to the Soviet Union between the wars, at a time when eye-witness reports played a particularly important role and the authorities courted fellow travellers and liberal intellectuals as well as Communists. There were many who had the wool pulled over their eyes, including Marxists who declared that the internal contradictions of the Russian revolution contained nothing surprising, and those who penetrated the veil and were thereby deemed by the faithful to be traitors to the cause. The system served to direct attention to what the hosts want to show, and, although not impregnable, placed the visitor in a schizoid position—on the one hand, the hospitality is genuine, on the other, the trouble people take on your behalf serves to shield you from reality, even if there’s no actual intention to deceive. In Cuba, the official line warned against discussing certain things with foreigners in order not to give arms to the enemy, as the phrase had it, although when you came to know people, this didn’t stop them explaining why, and revealing their own awareness in the process.

However, Cuba in the Cold War was significantly different from the Soviet Union before WWII, especially after the Missile Crisis. A mere island blockaded by its northern neighbour, it became a focus of attention in a reconfigured world in which a defiant revolution aligned itself with Third World liberation struggles. Those who were drawn to Havana by Cuba's anti-imperialist revolutionary culture understood its protection by the Soviet Union as a geopolitical necessity and did not confuse Fidelismo with Stalinism (until the unfortunate turn at the start of the 1970s when the poet Heberto Padilla was pilloried for ideological deviation, an authoritarian move, to be sure, but hardly Stalinist). They saw Cuba the same way as their hosts, a country not of the Second World but the Third, and were not blind to its underdevelopment, nor to the fact that the hotels where they lodged were out of bounds to ordinary Cubans, who could not have afforded them anyway (on the other hand, the state, aware of the lack of privacy that people endured in their crowded homes, ran *albergues* where couples could hire rooms by the hour).

For Cuba, belonging to the Soviet sphere meant accepting its administrative practices and a tightening of ideological reins, but only up to a point. In a culture imbued with Afro-Cuban syncretism, the doctrines of socialist realism were off the agenda; as Fidel famously told Khrushchev on a visit, "the enemy is imperialism, not abstract art". The Soviet embrace also meant escaping from the unequal terms of trade of the world market, since the Soviet Union paid preferential rates for Cuban sugar. When the Soviet Union collapsed, many people, inside the country as well as outside, assumed the collapse of Cuban Communism would follow, especially given the fall in the international sugar price, which forced Cuba to sell its sugar for as little as three times less than previously, while production costs were rising. Output fell by fifty percent in the space of four years. Sugar mills closed down. The decision to expand the tourist industry in a bid for foreign income followed a formula originating in the construction of the emblematic Havana Libre Hotel just before the Revolution, originally the Havana Hilton but built with Cuban funds and only managed by Hilton. Now foreign investors were invited to conduct business in the country in the form of joint ventures with state-owned entities, allowing the state to ensure proper social benefits for the local communities and protection for the environment. The approach was strategic, and the Cuban government went into the tourism business with its eyes open. A commission for environmental protection had been set up as early as 1977, followed by a plan for tourism in 1986, designed to use tourist revenues as an engine for the rest of the economy. According to the formula applied to the construction of the new hotels that would be needed, the state owns the properties and foreign companies, typically Spanish, run the business. Or, rather, the Cuban side is an entity called Gaviota, which belongs to a giant holding company, GAESA, the Armed Forces Business Enterprises Group (GAESA), a military-run conglomerate involved in all sectors of the economy which began modestly in the 1980s as an effort to bring modern management to civilian sectors mired in Soviet-style techniques of administration. Gaviota, which grew dramatically after Raúl Castro replaced his brother, operates across the tourism sector, including hotels, resorts, marinas, tours, car rentals, and travel agencies, and serves as the partner for most of the country's biggest foreign joint tourist ventures. This made it a target for Trump, who was set on undoing Obama's rapprochement, and proceeded, among other things, to prohibit US companies from conducting business with enterprises linked to the military, thus inconveniencing the increasing number of Americans, around 400,000 of them, who were travelling to Cuba in groups when he took office.

There is no doubt that Cuba had an attraction that went far beyond anything engineered by the tourist business. There was a period when I heard any number of people saying they would love to go before it all changed. Since change has come, however, this is no longer tourism of the revolution, and a new iconography was needed to sell a destination which history had rendered anachronistic. Part of the attraction was geographical but selling sun-and-sand holidays required extensive new installations along the keys fringing the island's north coast, including the necessary transport infrastructure; we will come back to the contradictions involved. City tourism is more complicated, not only more dispersed but

also more dependent on being able to package up the cultural environment, the museums and galleries, the sights and cuisine, the entertainment, and the nightlife. In doing this, the tourist industry treats the entire cultural field as raw material to be expropriated, processed, and exploited, like any other extractive industry except for being symbolic. Some of this raw material comes in the form of the city itself, its architecture and fabric which are ripe for reimagining, and some of it in the ambience of cultural performance generated within it. The job was made all the easier by the vibrancy of Cuban popular culture, especially its music, which had already made inroads into the global record business, where it was mixed up with the perennial process of symbiosis in the wider field of cultural production between performance and spectacle. In Cuba itself, the riches of its popular music had long been celebrated in the cinema, in numerous documentaries recycling the archive of popular performers going back to the 1930s, and live music was everywhere, including bars and restaurants where musicians were on the state payroll. The 1990s brought a synergy between the new tourism and the international film industry with films like Wim Wenders' *Buena Vista Social Club* in 1999, where the new iconography takes shape. Think of the 1950s convertibles which have been kept running by loving Cuban drivers, on which Wenders, like other documentarists before him (I've taken similar shots myself), allows his camera to linger. Evocative residues of the past, these cars have changed their symbolic meaning. Originally, they signified Cuba's modernity, like the introduction of television; then they came to signify its arrested development, as the USA turned its back and the island fell under Soviet tutelage; finally, they entered the circuit of tourism as their owners became taxi drivers, and their cars passed from being quaint relics to becoming trophies in the retrospective of postmodernism, sought after by northern foreigners prepared to pay hard dollars for them. On a symptomatic reading, what is registered here is a change which the image of Cuba has undergone since the collapse of the Soviet Union: a vestige of the Cold War, which continues to be a victim of bullying by its overbearing neighbour.

The city succumbs and at the same time resists, insisting on showing itself to the camera warts and all. New buildings appear, not only hotels but also shopping centres, while around the corner façades crumble and broken sewers spew their contents along the streets. The old Hispanic city, Habana Vieja, is restored and UNESCO declares it a world heritage site. The project is controlled by a local hero, Eusebio Leal, the official City Historian; income from tourism is invested in restoration of more than 300 derelict colonial buildings and thousands of homes for local inhabitants (although much substandard housing remains). The state hotels, stores, and eateries in colonial Old Havana are owned by Habaguanex, which was recently taken over by GAESA. Albeit with the best of intentions, authenticity is cleaned up and staged, and with the low-level liberalisation of the economy, more and more people become engaged in catering to the tourist market. Since the tourist rarely makes the acquaintance of a native who is not employed in tourist services, these workers fulfil a double function, simultaneously providers of services and of local colour, part of the consumed product. In Habana Vieja, first port of call for the cruise ships which towered over the nearby port until Trump stopped them, street sellers vie with souvenir stalls selling handicraft, taxi drivers and guides, and authentic restaurants. By the time we went to shoot our film in 2019, there were any number of stylish restaurants and cafes in other fashionable districts, the first boutique hotels had appeared, and numerous private households rented out rooms on Airbnb (but I couldn't obtain a shot of one of the cruise ships because Trump had stopped them coming).

For the purposes of this film, we visited several tourist installations in order to trace the way that tourism had added a new commodity to the successive waves of tobacco, coffee, and sugar which had long distorted the Cuban economy and disfigured the environment; especially sugar, which replaced forests with plantations leaving soil degradation and pollution in their wake. We made our base in the small port of Caibarién on the north coast (where Hurricane Irma made landfall in 2017), close to the new tourist complex on Cayo Santa Maria. No-one lives on the key, where the first of several all-inclusive sea-and-sand vacation hotels opened in 2001. To reach it, you have to drive along a 48-kilometre causeway,

incorporating 46 bridges; some of them were damaged by Hurricane Irma. For the more adventurous guests, there are excursions they can make, for example, to the attractively restored colonial town of Remedios, or near Caibarién, an old sugar mill which has been converted into a Museum of Sugar, both making an appearance in the film. These are no more than pinpricks, however, on the foreigners' cognitive map of the island, and not actual, real places at all. Caibarién itself, although the nearest town, is not on their itinerary, but caters to domestic tourists with a very large number of private bed-and-breakfast *hostales*, including the one we stayed in, except for the weekend we spent in one of the hotels on the Cayo. These are like two different worlds, visually represented in the film through a contrast in cuisine, as the hotel restaurant cuts to Caibarién's market. Cuba imports a huge proportion of its staple foods—recent years have seen this increase to as much as 70%—but Caibarién is well supplied by its agriculturally varied hinterland, and the food served in its restaurants is fresh and wholesome in the local style. On the key, the cuisine is international, and a large part of the provisions are specially flown in.

The different taste of the food escapes the camera because it belongs to the level of the phenomenological experience of bodies, not mechanized lenses; likewise are the different experiences of filming in Caibarién and at the hotel on the key. In the hotel, because we were filming with the same kind of small handheld cameras as tourists carry and were not conducting interviews, we passed unnoticed. Not so in Caibarién. Here, we were being watched, not for the first time in my experience of making documentaries for television—in some places it goes with the territory and begins with your travel visa (unless, that is, you can avoid the proper accreditation, which entails risks, but also, with lightweight video instead of bulky 16 mm cameras, gives the independent filmmaker a certain invisibility). This territory is multilayered. The documentary filmmaker is situated within a triple grid. In front of them is a certain reality to be put on the screen, the profilmic reality that always remains fragmentary and elusive, call it the ostensive content of the film. Looking over their shoulder is the institutional setting which provides the funding and the conditions for reaching the audience, controlling but remote. Between them, however, lies an intermediate level which is also hidden from the viewer, in which, as Fredric Jameson states, “what we're not seeing but is present all the time. . . is the drama of the film-maker” in the process of making the film, a story that cannot be filmed, because it's what happens off camera (Chanan 2004). Here, the territory you have to manoeuvre sometimes becomes murky.

Perhaps we were being naïve, but despite our many collective years of experience of Cuba, in this unfiled story, we were almost derailed. We drove to Caibarién, checked into our B&B—like elsewhere in the world, this means presenting your passport—and started filming first thing the next morning. The following day, we were summoned to the local offices of the Interior Ministry. They interviewed two of us separately, took us for journalists, and asked to see our visas, which had been issued on the basis that we were academics making an educational documentary in collaboration with an environmental NGO in Havana and the film institute, ICAIC. When we explained the difference, the affable officer who interviewed us agreed we could carry on. The local government, known as Assemblies of Popular Power, was a different matter. We checked in with them only to discover that the necessary permission, issued by the ICAIC, which should have been communicated to them by way of the provincial capital in Santa Clara, had not been received. We were not sure why. But until Santa Clara had given what should have been their customary approval, the President of the local authority in Caibarién would not do so. Assuming the problem would be sorted, we carried on filming, and then found we were being followed around. This lasted a day or two, so we restricted our filming to supposedly touristy scenes, delaying the interviews we wanted with local personalities, and then arranged for a couple of people to come to the *hostal* where we were staying instead of us going to them.

It was difficult to gauge their thinking. We put our heads together but could only speculate. Maybe there was someone in Santa Clara who had some reason to impede us. Perhaps the local authority was afraid of things people might say on camera which could

tarnish the town's image, or perhaps their own; especially because our fixer in Caibarién, a locally well-known ecological activist (who also appears on camera), was regarded in some quarters with a measure of suspicion. These are things you cannot know. The story you're living through, at the phenomenological level, is full of gaps and puzzles which we normally skate over but in this sort of situation come to the fore. Then we realised, through a contact in Santa Clara who worked in the local Communist Party offices, that there was also a structural problem to consider, which we knew existed well enough in theory but had no direct contact with, because the Party forms a parallel structure operating behind closed doors. But this clarified nothing, because we would never know if that is where the blockage lay. And then maybe it didn't lie there either, but in the disconnect between the central authority of the state and the layers of governance in the provinces. We had been caught up in an instance of this disconnect, which on the other hand, is part of the everyday reality of the local citizen, a reality which is normally hidden from the touristic visitor. In the end, despite the efforts of our institutional partners, the required permission never came through, although it didn't stop us filming most of what we wanted, including several scenes of environmental pollution. But then it's a rule of documentary that you have a shooting plan but not a script, because the profilmic world doesn't behave on cue.

People we interviewed were clearly sympathetic to our plight and critical of the local authority. Whatever the explanation, it seemed to us that the inevitable yet weak bureaucratic need to assert control was driven by paranoia, and this of course only produces more paranoia in those who brush up against it, including, momentarily, ourselves. This would seem to say something about shortcomings in the relations between the local authority and the people they're elected to serve. A political problem, then, at the local level, but also a reflection of a tension between the prerogatives of local government and the central authorities in the capital.

When we got back to Havana and recounted the problem we'd encountered, our collaborators were not too worried (but then Havana and Caibarién are as distant from each other as London and, let's say, Falmouth). Also, another explanation emerged. There was indeed an issue between Caibarién and Santa Clara. The folk in Caibarién were resentful that Santa Clara put more resources into the nearby and older town of Remedios, where the buildings around the central square had been beautifully restored, but no equivalent work had been carried out in Caibarién. According to an independent producer in Havana, who would undoubtedly have sorted everything out before we arrived but whose services we couldn't afford, we had inadvertently chosen the most troublesome of places as our principal location, where, sadly, the local authorities were particularly blinkered. We needed no permissions anywhere else we filmed, in Havana or the countryside in Artemisa beyond the capital to the west, where the last part of the film was shot.

Among the dangers that international tourism elicits are those of the black market and prostitution. Neither in Cuba are run by organised crime, and no brothels, sex cinemas, or sex shops are allowed (which doesn't mean prostitution is absent). However, with the economic privations of the 1990s, the informal economy was extensive. According to one report, for example, a luxury hotel in the resort of Varadero, one of the new mixed enterprises managed by a Spanish company, consumed no more than 40% of the quantity of goods supplied to a similar hotel at the same resort under Cuban administration (Alea 1991). In other words, some 60% of the goods supplied to the Cuban hotel was disappearing into the subterranean economy, of which, of course, the guests in either hotel remained blissfully unaware. Meanwhile, many everyday articles, from light bulbs to toothpaste, could often only be obtained by recourse to informal suppliers, and an ethos developed in which, since everyone did it, they also forgave each other for it; there was no other way to get by (this is not speculation on my part, but the comment of a filmmaker who was a senior member of the Party). There were also contradictions at a structural level. The development of Cayo Santa Maria was a long-term project; begun in 1989, the causeway to Cayo Santa Maria took ten years to build and was constructed with due care for the environment; indeed, it was designed to benefit the growth of mangrove swamps. On the

other hand, and despite the planning frameworks, a new tourist complex like this creates problems for local development, acting as a pole of attraction for investment and labour which leaves an imbalance in the nearby periphery. As a result, a town like Caibarién finds itself marginalised.

The plans did not place all the eggs in one basket, however, and other forms of tourism were pursued with more specialised appeal and hypothecated benefits. One of these was medical tourism, run by an official agency called Servimed, of which D'Eramo remarks that its promotional language is like that of a tourist brochure. Created in 1987—before that, Cuba treated foreigners for free—Servimed provides foreigners with access to hospitals and clinics for more than a hundred types of health service ranging from cancer treatment to cosmetic surgery, whose revenues are reinvested in the domestic health service. D'Eramo reports that customers come from countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela, knowing the treatment is equal to the US at much lower prices; even Miami Cubans brave the short flight down to Havana for the same reason. Does this turn the Cuban health system into a two-tier service? If so, he says, no one complains much, “for it is the tourist tier that supplies the dollars to pay for the free treatment of locals” (D'Eramo 2021, Chapter 5). Is Servimed some kind of state capitalism? Is it properly part of the tourist industry? Private individuals are only part of its business; its main role is government-to-government, and the result of the Revolution's early emphasis on free universal health care, which propelled Cuba to becoming a worldwide leader in healthcare for poor and rural populations across the world, and a centre for medical training, at the same time as developing a pioneering capability in biotechnology which, come COVID-19, allowed the development of its own vaccine. In 1987, as a privileged tourist of the revolution, subcategory foreign journalist, I was taken to see the then new biotechnology centre during a break in filming a report for UK television on human rights, when I was told it was Fidel Castro's personal project. Though I barely understood the explanations of the scientist who showed me round, I could see it was not a dictator's vanity project but a weapon in the face of the US blockade which prevented Cuban access to medicines readily available elsewhere. The answer was to develop alternatives which could also supply other poor countries at lower cost than big pharma. Good honest business.

The last place on our tourist itinerary in the film is another example of niche tourism, the complex of Las Terrazas in the Sierra Rosario, the location of a reforestation project initiated in 1968 which aimed to create what would now be called an ecologically sustainable community, and a site of ecotourism with its own hotel. The designation, and the development of similar facilities around the island, came later, as part of the push to develop the tourist industry in the 1990s. There is no single definition of ecotourism, a term for “responsible” travel which entered the vocabulary in the early 1980s, as the antithesis to the profligate consumerism of mass tourism and its alienated and artificial setting. The ecotourist is said to seek intimate contact with untrammelled nature, without adding to environmental damage, not only minimising the impact on the land, trees, and animal habitat, but, on the contrary, in support of sustainable development within the host community, thereby satisfying more than selfish needs for time out but gaining a more conscientious and restorative understanding of the ecosystem. There are many ways of doing this that are possible in Cuba: hiking, trekking, on horseback and cycling, bird watching, observing crocodiles, sport fishing, and speleology. Leaving aside the question of getting there, not all are as eco-aware as others, and sometimes ecotourism works to create simplistic images of local people and their uses and understanding of their surroundings. It works best when the destination is a community, supported by local farmers, fisherfolk, and craftworkers, and the installation is small in scale and self-supporting, but that also means it cannot substitute for the mass tourism of the city and the seaside.

Our interlocutor in the film on the subject of tourism is the environmental historian Reinaldo Funes, who compares mass tourism to the plantation era, in that both are constituted by dependent relationships between poor countries and rich countries; a pattern that extends across the whole of the Caribbean, where colonialism has given way to neocolonial-

ism and Cuba is a new competitor for chosen destination. Nor is it an “industry without chimneys”. The environmental cost of the flow of materials and energy, beginning with the journeys that bring people to the Caribbean, is huge. This creates a paradox, because the original mission of the Caribbean was to export calories, and now, to supply the tourist infrastructure and feed the people who come to enjoy the sun and sand, it has to import them. It doesn’t even gain the full value of the tourist commodity, because in economic terms, the host country is at the bottom of the supply chain, after the airlines and agencies and cruise ship operators who take their share of the asking price before any money reaches the destination.

The Cuban economy was already vulnerable before and is now caught in a trap. Cautiously reopening tourism as the pandemic came under control and being cut off from the north saved it from an influx of infection from the States, but with Canada also closed, Cuba pinned its hopes on Russians, who made up 40 percent of all visitors in 2021. Then came the war in Ukraine. Flights stopped almost overnight and thousands of Russian holidaymakers (and several hundred Ukrainians) desperately tried to get home (they are now being enticed back).

At the same time, as the economy contracted and conditions on the island deteriorated, Cuban emigration increased. This too is reflected in Caibarién, although not in the film, and is another example of Cuba as a telling microcosm, whose situation, while seemingly unique, nevertheless reflects the forces operating in the wider world from which it has been economically excluded by the US blockade. In the film we learn that Caibarién is one of the twenty coastal localities in Cuba expected to see the greatest impact of rising sea levels. We don’t mention, because it would have introduced a knotty question beyond our scope, that it also has a high level of emigration. The link is independent of the reasons individuals have for their choice of action, but points to a problematic that is not just local, or even national, but global. At the local level, the town has suffered long-term decline. At the national level, there’s a long and divisive history of emigration, both authorised and unauthorised. At the global level, Cuba is only one of numerous instances of mass migration occurring around the globe for reasons among which ecological factors are increasingly significant, either directly or indirectly.

The whole topic is thrown into confusion because public debate is permeated by a typology that confuses migrants, refugees, and exiles. An exile is someone expelled from their country or driven out to escape political persecution. Brecht, who knew what he was talking about, once called the exile a bringer of bad news, but does the same not apply to the refugee who has been rendered homeless and forced to migrate because of war or famine? What does it mean to say that migrants are those who choose to move to another country for economic or social reasons when substantial numbers feel compelled to do so by lack of opportunity or some other inhibiting factor at home, and, unlike oligarchs, they skimp and save, or go into debt, and even risk their lives in order to do so? The BBC runs an educational website for teenagers which says that there are over 258 million migrants around the world living outside their country of birth and the figure is expected to grow for a number of reasons.<sup>3</sup> It doesn’t talk about the shifting policies of national governments and international agencies in the effort to manage and control these population movements, which it says are due to population growth, increasing connectivity, trade, rising inequality, demographic imbalances, and climate change. It doesn’t say that these are not discrete categories but factors that interact and reinforce each other. It lists what are called the push factors that drive people to leave somewhere; the list is somewhat general and random: lack of services, lack of safety, high crime, crop failure, drought, flooding, poverty, war. It shrinks from saying that, directly or indirectly, the major cause of the now expectable growth in the displacement of populations is the losing battle against climate change.

The direct threat to Caibarién from the sea is the result of geography, not geopolitics; the same as the threat hanging over the ancient East Anglian village of Happisburgh, which is not only recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 but the site of an archaeological find in 2010 of flint tools dating back over 800,000 years. Having survived the encroachment of the

sea for centuries, it is now predicted that its fourteenth-century church, sixteenth-century pub and many homes will be lost to the sea in the next thirty years or so. In political terms, both places fall under the policy category of internal migration, with the implication that resettlement cannot be left to the market, but the global population movements due to climate change will be transcontinental; they already are. And the people involved are not tourists. They live in the netherworld of tourism, its inevitable underbelly.

**Funding:** This paper received no external funding. The film on which it is based was funded by the AHRC.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Cuba: Living Between Hurricanes*, 2019, directed by Michael Chanan, written and produced by Jean Stubbs and Jonathan Curry-Machado, made with funding from the AHRC and in collaboration with a Cuban NGO, Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez, and ICAIC. Where no other source is given, data cited in the essay are drawn from this film.
- <sup>2</sup> An extract is included in *Cuba: Living Between Hurricanes*. The complete speech can be seen at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6dK34e3Kcs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6dK34e3Kcs) (accessed on 21 April 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> ‘Migration trends’, [www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z8x6wxs/revision/2](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z8x6wxs/revision/2) (accessed on 21 April 2023).

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