



still from 'the illusion'

***the illusion* by Susana Barriga**

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the illusion. Written, directed, and filmed by Susana Barriga. Produced by the EICTV (Escuela internacional de cine y televisión). HDV, 24 minutes. Cuba, 2008.



Fragmented face of a woman seen through a dirt-streaked subway window in the illusion.
Courtesy of Susana Barriga.

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Susana Barriga's documentary, *the illusion*, begins with violence. A long shot reveals a man standing on a street corner, his features indiscernible in the night. He moves out of the camera's line of vision, but the filmmaker, persistent, moves with him as the jostling of the camera marks her steps. As we learn moments later, the man in the distance is Susana's father – and this is the clearest image of him we will have. Suddenly, an angry British man demands that Susana cease filming. "I definitely understand who you are!" he shouts. Susana protests in heavily accented English, "He is my father!" Glimpses of a man's torso are followed by blurred images as the camera spins rapidly over surfaces. The image cuts to black. A new male voice asks in carefully spaced out words if Susana would like him to call the police. When she doesn't respond immediately, he speaks louder, as though volume would compensate for the language difference. She gives her name; she refuses the offer of an ambulance.



Reflection of a passenger in the subway window in *the illusion*.
Courtesy of Susana Barriga.

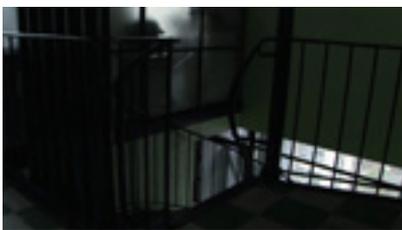
Winner of a DAAD scholarship to Germany at the 2009 Berlinale, *the illusion* recounts Susana's journey to London to find her father, in exile since 1994. Produced as her thesis project for the international film school in Cuba (EICTV) while on exchange at the University of Salford, *the illusion* is part of an explosion of work by young Cuban filmmakers facilitated by digital technology. Many of these youth have turned to the emotional dimensions of Cuban life, tracking how their subjects' experiences complicate the clear divisions between allies and enemies upheld by the Cuban state as well as dissidents. By filming, editing, and recording the documentary's sound herself, using a lightweight HDV camera and onboard microphone, Susana takes such explorations to new depths of intimacy in one of Cuba's rare autobiographical documentaries. While Susana's father could see the camera during their encounter, there was no indication it was on. The result is a haunting document of how Cuban politics tear her family apart.

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Hands intertwined on a subway handrail in *the illusion*.
Courtesy of Susana Barriga.

The film is told in a circular mode, opening and closing with the same scene of violence. Its narrative heart is an account of the events that lead to this confrontation: Susana's surprise arrival on her father's doorstep and the gradual revelation of their incommensurable views of their shared histories. At moments of particular emotional intensity, the film cuts to shots of passengers on the London underground whose isolation echo the distance between father and daughter. Through voiceovers, Susana relates the fantasies she harboured of this family reunion. But just as the angry man in the opening sequence sees Susana as a threat and the man who helps her reduces her to the status of foreigner, Susana's father "knows who she is" - and this identity has more to do with Cuban politics than with her longed-for status as daughter. Greeting her at first with shock followed by a kiss, Susana's father quickly succumbs to paranoia. Demanding to see her passport, he reduces her to this citizenship when he learns of her intention to return to Cuba. Against her protests, he intimates that she is working with "Fidel Castro's people" in London. He tells her that they will congratulate her for what she has done. He says he doesn't want her to have his last name. But Susana recognizes her own complicity in the breach of familial trust. "I was thinking about the camera. I never told him I was filming," intones the voiceover.



A rare stable framing. Staircase on the threshold of Susana's father's apartment in *the illusion*.
Courtesy of Susana Barriga.

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Susana's camera both instigates and records violence. In the opening sequence, the shaky camera movements indicate first her aggressive pursuit of her father and then the stranger's aggression against her. Susana's conversation with her father is accompanied by fragmentary, handheld images of her father's apartment and the London underground: the shadowy outline of her father's leg, a glimpse of a green kitchen seen sideways, hands intertwined on a subway handrail, a woman looking directly into the camera through a dirt-streaked subway window. Indexing its connection to Susana's own body, the camera's awkward movements grant us a visceral impression of co-presence to events, but the confused images deny us the comfort of an authoritative vantage point. We cannot be sure of what happened.

Comments posted to blogs and news articles about the documentary range from praise for its depiction of a common Cuban trauma to denouncement of Susana's decision to film her father without his knowledge. Even commentators who haven't seen the film declare the work "for" or "against" the Cuban state (Agencias 2009; Hernández Busto 2009). Such polarization risks reducing the film to the Manichean politics *the illusion* complicates. By calling attention to her dissimulation of the camera, Susana invites viewers to reach their own ethical conclusions. By imposing limits on our vision, the film's fragmentary aesthetic reminds us how little we understand the personal and political histories behind the reunion. Refusing to assign guilt or take sides, *the illusion* testifies powerfully to the havoc political paranoia wreaks in the intimate lives of Cubans.

Laura-Zoë Humphreys is a Joint PhD candidate in the departments of anthropology and film studies at the University of Chicago. She is currently writing a dissertation on social criticism and censorship in Cuban cinema post 1989. Her research explores how Cuban filmmakers struggle to balance commitment to socialist values with criticism of current Cuban politics, and how this is changing as their faith in socialism wavers. The author would like to thank the staff and students of the EICTV, who made this research possible.

Works Cited

Agencias. 2009. "[La Berlinale acoge el desgarrador filme de Susana Barriga.](#)" *Cubaencuentro*. (Accessed 3 April 2010).

Hernández Busto, Ernesto. 2009. "[Sobre 'The Illusion' de Susana Barriga.](#)" *Penúltimos días*. (Accessed 3 April 2010).