

PROOF

Part IV
Feelings, Technologies, Politics

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Symptomologies of the State:
Cuba's 'Email War' and the
Paranoid Public Sphere

Laura-Zoë Humphreys

Return of the censor

On 5 January 2007, an elderly poet by the name of Luis Pavón Tamayo appeared on a Cuban television show dedicated to celebrating the cultural contributions of well-known artists and intellectuals. As an artist, Cuban intellectuals would tell you that Pavón was nothing to write home about. But as a censor, he had acquired extraordinary levels of notoriety. As head of the *Consejo nacional de cultura* (the National Cultural Council) from 1971 to 1976, Pavón oversaw national cultural policy during a militant period later denominated the *quinquenio gris* (the 'five grey years'), the *decada negra* (the 'black decade') by the more pessimistic, or even, in a dubious homage, as the *Pavonato*. This was an era when gay or otherwise 'problematic' artists were fired from their jobs and relegated to obscure workplaces, when long-haired young men were picked up off the streets and subjected to forced hair cuts, when Beatles records were smuggled in and youth listened to them in secret. No mention of this aspect of Pavón's professional history was made in the programme.

Cuban intellectuals were horrified. The morning after, writer Jorge Ángel Pérez sent an email criticizing the television appearance to a handful of his friends who in turn forwarded the scandalous news to their own lists of contacts. Fuelled by fears that Pavón's return represented a secret conspiracy to restore a more militant cultural policy, these emails quickly went viral. Within a few days the Cuban intellectual community, both on the island and in exile, was engaged in a heated email debate about censorship in the 1970s and in the present. In what came to be known as the *guerra de los emails* or the email war, an exchange between a group of friends and colleagues grew into a counterpublic

1 that seemed to promise a new dialogue between islanders and the
2 diaspora, supporters of socialism and dissidents.¹

3 State socialism, it is often assumed, cannot possibly allow for a liberal
4 public sphere; the requisite freedom of speech is permanently blocked
5 by a state that carefully monitors all public media. The solution to this
6 problem seems simple: stop state censorship, allow freedom of speech,
7 in short 'open up' the public sphere. Such an opening is, at first glance,
8 precisely what the 'digital revolution' seems to promise in Cuba. By
9 turning to email as a medium for debate, writers, film workers, and
10 other cultural producers and critics circumvented state censorship and
11 renewed their aspirations to act as public intellectuals who 'speak truth
12 to power'. Yet as they anxiously scanned every new event and interven-
13 tion for signs of state conspiracy or political opportunism, intellectuals
14 inadvertently strengthened the political divides between islanders and
15 emigrants they had hoped to overcome. Ultimately, participants were
16 left uncertain as to whether the email war heralded new vistas of free-
17 dom or modernized state tactics to suppress dissent. In this chapter,
18 I argue that their ambivalence reflects the paradoxical effects of digital
19 technologies in Cuba. Far from securing the political transparency and
20 open dialogue to which Cuban intellectuals aspire, digital technologies
21 feed into and even exacerbate the political paranoia that has long gov-
22 erned the Cuban public sphere.

23 24 **Paranoid traditions**

25
26 The email war's proliferation of political paranoia (a concept to be dis-
27 tinguished from paranoia as clinical psychosis) was, to an extent, sim-
28 ply another instalment in a longstanding tradition in Cuban politics.
29 Born in and in many ways of the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution was
30 characterized from the start by conspiracy thinking on the part of its
31 political leaders. Faced with the real threat of rebels in the Escambray
32 Mountains and invasion by Miami-based exiles, the Cuban state was
33 quick to call on its people to scan everyone and everything for signs
34 of enemy activity. With the establishment in every neighbourhood of
35 CDRs (Committees for the Defence of the Revolution) entrusted with
36 community organizing and vigilance, the state secured the spread of
37 this suspicion among the general populace.²

38 In June 1961, Fidel Castro enshrined political paranoia as the guiding
39 policy of the artistic and intellectual field. Only a few months before,
40 Cuban military forces thwarted the CIA-backed Bay of Pigs invasion
41 by exiles and the state film institute, the ICAIC, censored a short

1 documentary, *P.M.* This act of censorship led to three days of debate
2 among artists and intellectuals over the question of artistic freedom,
3 closed by Fidel Castro with a speech known as *Palabras a los intelectuales*
4 (*Words to the Intellectuals*). He began his speech by gesturing towards a
5 climate of exchange and dialogue between politicians and intellectuals
6 then quickly asserted a threat that trumped the intellectuals' concerns.
7 Over the three days of meetings, he explained, he had heard them
8 express their fears that the Revolution would 'exceed its boundaries'
9 and 'asphyxiate the creative genius of our citizens'. Such fears, Fidel
10 Castro insisted, paled in comparison to the real and present dangers
11 faced by the Revolution. Protecting the Revolution from its enemies
12 must therefore serve as a hard limit to freedom of expression in Cuba.

13 The artist or writer who was a revolutionary could never fear for their
14 creative liberty, Fidel Castro declared, because such a person would
15 place the Revolution and its needs above all else, including their own
16 creative vocation. The question was also 'not a problem' for counter-
17 revolutionary artists or intellectuals because they knew 'where they
18 should go'. It was only those artists and intellectuals who 'don't have
19 a revolutionary attitude towards life but who, nonetheless, are honest
20 people' for whom the Revolution could pose a threat. To these intellec-
21 tuals, Fidel Castro provided questionable reassurance. '[T]he Revolution
22 cannot renounce having all honest men and women march alongside
23 it', he declared, 'the Revolution has to aspire to converting everyone
24 with doubts into a revolutionary'. And finally, in a phrase that has gov-
25 erned cultural policy to the present moment, he concluded, 'inside the
26 Revolution everything, outside the Revolution nothing' (Castro, 1961:
27 12–15). With the enemies of the Revolution as an absolute limit, Fidel
28 Castro thus assured those intellectuals and artists who were neither revo-
29 lutionaries nor counter-revolutionaries of the dubious freedom of con-
30 tinuing to create while revolutionaries worked towards the anticipated
31 day when the entire citizenry would line up behind their ideals.

32 Fidel Castro's speech thus cast freedom of creation in the shadow of
33 the enemies of the Revolution and made determining the difference
34 between allies and foes a question of detecting intellectuals' interior
35 political beliefs and allegiances. Notwithstanding his brief mention
36 of form and content, artistic works themselves were not the principle
37 objects of concern in his speech. As evidenced in the use of words such
38 as 'honest' and 'dishonest' or 'revolutionary' and 'counter-revolutionary'
39 to describe intellectuals, it was the political intentions of artists that
40 were to be put on trial. The resulting profusion of paranoia invited read-
41 ings that scoured texts for secret political plots. Linking freedom in the

1 Revolution with political belief, *Palabras* instituted an anxious sympto-
2 mology as its measure.

3 The elaboration of the Ministry of Interior's secret police system, the
4 penetration of everyday life by the CDRs, and the centralization of artis-
5 tic and intellectual activity into a few state institutes provided the state
6 with the means to spy on and intervene in its citizens' every activity.
7 But it also ensured a rampant paranoia that cut both ways. As Richard
8 Hofstadter (1965) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) observe in their
9 essays on paranoia in the U.S., the political paranoid tends to imitate
10 what he knows or imagines as his enemy's activities. Citizens became
11 talented symptomologists as they not only obeyed state injunctions to
12 pry into their neighbours' affairs for signs of counter-revolutionary activ-
13 ity, but also, in a system where everyone must deal in illegalities to make
14 ends meet, watched for the signs of jealousy that would prompt a neigh-
15 bour to turn them in. Just as every contact with family who had left for
16 Miami could be transformed into a sign of someone's political betrayal,
17 every denouncement was either proof positive of Fidel Castro's capacity
18 to have eyes and ears everywhere or the potential sign of an *oportunista*
19 (opportunist) or person with *doble moral* (double morality) ready to
20 play the political heavy for the sake of a career advancement, material
21 rewards, or merely to satisfy a personal vendetta (Fagen, 1969).³

22 A similar double-edged paranoia came to characterize the cultural
23 field as Cuban intellectuals split in their interpretation of *Palabras* and
24 in their assessment of the causes of censorship into two modes that
25 I will term the dogmatist thesis and the totalitarian thesis. For propo-
26 nents of the dogmatist thesis, Fidel's declaration, 'inside the Revolution
27 everything, outside the Revolution nothing', was a guarantee of artis-
28 tic freedom. Defending controversial work by declaring it 'criticism
29 from within', they used Fidel Castro's words to contest and expand
30 the boundaries of the permissible. The difficulty, they argued, is that
31 by leaving unclear what 'within the Revolution' looks like, the speech
32 opened the door for those who from either erroneous conviction or
33 political *oportunismo* would seek the signs of counter-revolution where
34 there was only socialist criticism to be found. For the second group, the
35 speech licensed censorship and anyone who deferred to it in any way
36 was guilty of complicity with the state. If every work of art or intellectual
37 essay could hide counter-revolutionary designs, then every denounce-
38 ment of an artist and his work was either a sign of an opportunistic
39 power play by a dogmatic bureaucrat or the result of a direct order from
40 Fidel Castro. As we shall see, these two opposing modes of interpreting
41 state conspiracy played themselves out throughout the email war.

Chance has no chance against censorship

Seven months after the email war had come to a close, I sat discussing cultural politics over Cuban-style espressos with an intellectual who had been actively involved in these events. When I brought up the subject of the email war, he rushed to correct me: 'That's just a pejorative name invented by the officials. It wasn't a war; everyone who participated was on the same side.'⁴ Yet as I spoke with other intellectuals and read through the hundreds of pages of emails archived by the dissident website to which he directed me, it struck me that the invocation of war bore some accuracy. The letters revealed a general outrage against Pavón's television appearance and a consensus that Cuba was badly in need of a more 'open' public sphere of social criticism and debate. But this consensus was woven through with paranoia as intellectuals found in both the original event and in subsequent interventions signs of secret plots fomented by an enemy on whose name they could not agree.

In a paranoid worldview, chance or coincidence seems impossible. Hofstadter argues that the mark of the paranoid political style is not the lack of rationality but rather its excess. '[T]he paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world', writes Hofstadter, 'since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities' (1965: 36). Rather than viewing history as a series of unintentional forces, he explains, the political paranoid discovers links between disparate events and finds at their origin the secret actions of an enemy bent on destroying entire ways of life (Hofstadter, 1965). As Sedgwick (2003) argues, the political paranoid anticipates the enemy's presence. Preferring to locate the principle he dreads rather than risk being taken by surprise, he reads everything as a sign of his enemy's presence, even when the events or texts in question might yield other meanings.

From the beginning, a similar paranoid symptomology fuelled the reactions of Cuban intellectuals on the island to Pavón's appearance. They soon linked the censor's minute of fame to other recent events, anxiously detecting in their confluence signs of secret political manoeuvres to restore militant cultural policies or at least whitewash the censors' histories. After 1976, Luis Pavón disappeared from public view. His sudden re-emergence on a programme that portrayed him as a national hero brought to mind another morbid thought that was on everyone's minds in January 2007: the imminent possibility of Fidel Castro's demise. Only a few months before Fidel Castro had withdrawn from public life due to serious health problems, leaving his brother serving in his stead. The deliberate secrecy surrounding his illness fed speculations

1 that the founder and emblem of the Revolution might soon be gone
2 forever. Other ghosts from the past had also recently returned to the
3 Cuban political scene. In the months leading up to 5 January, Jorge
4 Serguera and Armando Quesada, responsible respectively for the censor-
5 ship of radio and television and for the decimation of theatre during the
6 1970s, had also appeared as special guests on television shows.

7 A group of intellectuals with established positions in national cultural
8 organizations were the first to respond to these events. Acknowledging
9 that Pavón was only one player in a generally repressive era, Cuban
10 magazine editor and translator Desiderio Navarro accused him of seeking
11 out 'supposedly grave threats and dangers' with an excessive zeal that
12 prompted erroneous decisions 'higher up' and provoked the emigration
13 of those artists 'whose alarm Fidel had tried to dissipate in *Palabras a los*
14 *intelectuales*'. Making an ominous pattern out of recent events, Navarro
15 demanded to know 'why this sudden glorious media resurrection of Luis
16 Pavón ... occurred precisely at this moment in the history of our coun-
17 try, a moment when the entire nation is waiting to know the outcome
18 of the convalescence of our Commander in Chief, and this only a few
19 days after the equally sudden television reappearance of Jorge Serguera'.
20 Cuban novelist and scriptwriter Arturo Arango responded to Navarro's
21 letter with equal confidence that mere coincidence could not explain the
22 television appearances or their timing. 'Although it seems like the product
23 of chance', he argued, 'the appearances of Jorge Serguera and Luis Pavón
24 Tamayo on Cuban television only a few days apart from one another have
25 to be interpreted as a symptom'. 'It's better to be taken for paranoid than it
26 is to seem an idiot', concluded architect Mario Coyula as he approved the
27 call to action, 'let's hope that it's only a coincidence' (Consenso, 2007).⁵

28 As the emails snowballed, Abel Prieto, the Minister of Culture, called
29 a meeting with this group of intellectuals and the President of the
30 Cuban Institute of Radio and Television, the ICRT. The latter tried to
31 quell the intellectuals' suspicions. The failure to mention Pavón's his-
32 tory had been pure coincidence, he argued, the chance outcome of
33 his selection through regular channels as a guest for the show and the
34 young script researcher's unfamiliarity with this period of his life. But
35 the intellectuals, convinced that these events were a symptom whose
36 cause they already knew, were having none of it. Pavón and his cronies
37 might be too old to represent a real threat, they argued, but their resur-
38 rection from oblivion was a sign of a potential threat to the cultural
39 field by dogmatic tendencies that had to be stopped.⁶ The coincidence
40 of these events with Fidel's sickness not only increased intellectuals'
41 suspicions but also added to their sense of urgency. Even those who did

not suspect a conspiracy saw the email war as an opportunity to shape Cuban politics at a moment when the future seemed uncertain.

When open is closed

Within a matter of days the circulation of emails took on a more public dimension than any of the initial writers could have anticipated. Intellectuals sometimes discovered to their surprise that the letters they addressed to one or a few individuals quickly reached an international audience as they were first forwarded widely and later published to the Web. They responded to this novel phenomenon with both enthusiasm and pessimism. On the one hand, the email war demonstrated, for the first time, the medium's potential to create a counterpublic that escaped the direct control of the state and allowed a novel exchange between islanders and emigrants. With some trepidation, intellectuals argued that the debate should be open to all, regardless of political background or geographic location.⁷

On the other hand, intellectuals were well aware that limiting the conversation to email meant confining the exchange to the local elite and those abroad. A recent survey published by the Cuban government (ONE, 2010) reports that only 2.9 per cent of Cubans regularly use the Internet while 5.8 per cent use email. Some Cubans access the Internet or email at work while others have varying degrees of access from home through their workplaces, ranging from a national Intranet account restricted to email to, in rare cases, full Internet. Articles, emails and other information from the Internet are often circulated hand to hand through flash drives and those Cubans with the financial means can take advantage of a thriving black market in pirated accounts. But only foreign residents (foreigners with work permits or student visas) can legally purchase dial-up Internet access from home. While many Cuban intellectuals and artists therefore find means – legal and otherwise – to access the Internet or at least email, the island is clearly largely unplugged.

Acutely aware of these limitations and convinced that questions of censorship were matters of broad public import, intellectuals nonetheless responded with suspicion to every attempt to move the debate to another medium. On 18 January 2007, the directors of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, the UNEAC, published a letter in the state newspaper, *Granma*, expressing solidarity with the protestors and reassuring readers that the television appearances were grave errors that didn't represent ICRT or Party policy. 'The Martí-inspired, antidogmatic, creative and participatory cultural policy of Fidel and Raúl founded with *Palabras*

1 *a los intelectuales* is irreversible', it concluded, exonerating the Party from
2 responsibility for the television shows and thereby laying to rest, its
3 authors hoped, any fears of an ambush on the cultural field (Consenso,
4 2007). The intellectuals were outraged. The letter was the only informa-
5 tion on the debate to emerge in the mass media, but while it named the
6 three TV shows it said nothing of what had happened to spark the pro-
7 test. Intellectuals complained of having to explain what had happened to
8 friends and neighbours left bewildered by the letter's lack of information.

9 To make matters worse, the letter declared the debate one between
10 revolutionaries, warning that while 'some intervened with honesty in the
11 polemics from outside Cuba, others, obviously working in the service of
12 the enemy, have wanted to manipulate and to take advantage of the
13 situation' (Consenso, 2007). By leaving out the essential details of the
14 contemporary and historical events that had sparked the email war,
15 the letter left the vast majority of the Cuban population with only a
16 vague and confused impression of controversy in elite circles. By invok-
17 ing the threat that enemies of the Revolution had tried to infiltrate and
18 take control of the exchange, the letter mobilized paranoia to re-establish
19 the limits to public dialogue that many intellectuals hoped the email
20 exchange would help undo. To many, it seemed an attempt by the state
21 to placate the intellectuals while preventing their debate from having
22 any public impact. Similar fears were provoked by a series of conferences
23 on the history of the *quinquenio gris* organized by Desiderio Navarro.
24 Although Navarro had been one of the first to spearhead the protest,
25 when he limited attendance to invitation only in order, he claimed, to
26 ensure adequate seating, many suspected that he was either deliberately
27 or inadvertently acting in complicity with the state to quell the debate.

29 **Absolute enemies**

31 The suspicions levelled against Navarro from across the political spec-
32 trum were part of a larger swell of paranoia directed by intellectuals
33 against one another. Despite initial hopes that the email exchange
34 would foment a new dialogue between islanders and emigrants, sup-
35 porters of socialism and dissidents, these traditional divides were ulti-
36 mately reinforced as intellectuals scanned interventions for signs of
37 *doble moral* and *oportunismo*.

38 As we have seen, the first group to respond to Pavón and his accom-
39 plices' television appearances subscribed to the dogmatist thesis, inter-
40 preting these events as yet another instalment in the ongoing battle
41 between the proponents of criticism from within and bureaucrats who

1 detected counter-revolution at every turn. A few days into the debate,
 2 some emigrants and islanders attacked this position. How could the TV
 3 appearances of Pavón and company signal the threat of a takeover of
 4 the cultural field, they asked, when these figures were only the puppets
 5 of the real power that had controlled the cultural field in the 1970s
 6 and still controlled it in the twenty-first century: Fidel Castro or, in his
 7 absence, Raúl? 'Everyone knew in the field of culture in the 1970s that
 8 Luis Pavón and the others were the result of Fidel Castro's politics',
 9 asserted Belkis Cuza Malé, 'Nothing happened in Cuba that didn't have
 10 his approval and wasn't one of his orders' (Consenso, 2007).

11 The key error of establishment intellectuals, argued proponents of the
 12 totalitarian thesis, was that they continued to defend the possibility of a
 13 socialist public sphere of debate and dialogue. Dismissing Navarro's claim
 14 that Pavón's excesses had trespassed the freedom established by *Palabras*,
 15 Duanel Díaz argued that it was Fidel Castro himself who decided who was
 16 'outside' the Revolution, hence prefiguring the homophobia and censor-
 17 ship of the 1970s. 'The limits of [Navarro's] position are basically those
 18 of individuals who insist at this stage in the game that freedom of criti-
 19 cism and Cuban socialism are not incompatible', wrote Díaz, 'The truth
 20 is exactly the opposite of what Navarro says: the very existence of social-
 21 ism, before and after the fall of the Wall, depends on repressing criticism,
 22 because this would melt it like a piece of ice exposed to the Cuban mid-
 23 day sun' (Consenso 2007). For proponents of the totalitarian thesis, only
 24 the denouncement of Fidel Castro and the rejection of socialism could
 25 provide a basis for social criticism and truth itself.

26 On either side of the debate intellectuals were quick to suspect and
 27 accuse one another of opportunism. Proponents of the totalitarian the-
 28 sis declared that those who were unwilling to denounce Fidel Castro
 29 cared only about protecting their own state-granted privileges. Even
 30 those who had suffered persecution in the 1970s had struck a compro-
 31 mise with the state, trading in the right to question Fidel Castro or the
 32 Party's leadership for a limited artistic freedom and the right to travel.
 33 For defenders of criticism within socialism, it was these self-styled
 34 heroes of freedom who were the true opportunists. They accused emi-
 35 grants in particular of denouncing socialism from comfortable positions
 36 abroad while dismissing those who struggled against censorship from
 37 within Cuba in ways they themselves had not been willing to risk while
 38 still residents of the island.⁸ The reduction of the cultural field to Fidel
 39 Castro on one side and the defence of criticism within the boundaries of
 40 the Revolution on the other irreparably divides these two groups, plac-
 41 ing them in antagonistic camps despite their shared goal of defeating

1 censorship in Cuba. Yet they unite in a shared hermeneutics of suspi-
2 cion that functions both as a means of deciphering one another's politi-
3 cal complicities and as a means of reading the state itself.

5 **Symptomologies of the state**

7 'The pleasure provided by anti-Communist reasoning was that Com-
8 munist made it so easy to play the game of finding the culprit, blaming
9 the Party, Stalin, Lenin, ultimately Marx himself', writes Slavoj Žižek. In
10 communism, he argues, power was palpable, concentrated in the figure
11 of its leaders as 'Oedipal Master' (Žižek, 1998: 18, 25–31). Yet, as he con-
12 tends elsewhere, Eastern European socialist regimes depended on citi-
13 zens' cynicism towards rather than their compliance with state ideology
14 (Žižek, 2001). Similarly, Katherine Verdery (1995) demonstrates that far
15 from mechanically reproducing the directives of leaders, intellectuals
16 under socialism struggled with the political hierarchy and one another
17 for control over the cultural field.

18 At once a transparently pyramidal system of authority that provides
19 citizens with the 'comfort' of knowing the direction from whence power
20 emanates and an often fractious conglomerate of competing institu-
21 tions, Cuban socialism belies imaginings that would place all blame at
22 the feet of dogmatic bureaucrats or reduce it to a puppet show manipu-
23 lated by Fidel Castro. Compounded by the secrecy that shrouds many
24 state decisions and struggles for power, this leaves citizens engaged in
25 symptomologies of the state that attempt to discern the source, scope
26 and implications of the decisions that affect their lives. Nowhere is this
27 more evident in Cuba than in struggles over censorship.

28 Whether they emphasized the culpability of Fidel Castro or Luis Pavón,
29 participants in the email war largely represented censorship as transpar-
30 ently oppressive, a cruel exercise of power whose source could be traced.
31 Yet memories of censorship in the 1970s and, even more acutely, in recent
32 years, complicate this picture. Take, for instance, the decision by Alfredo
33 Guevara, head of the ICAIC, to withhold the public screening of direc-
34 tor Humberto Solás's *Un día de noviembre* (*One Day in November*). *Un día*
35 reflects the devastation of the country's economy by the abrupt closure of
36 all remaining middle class businesses in the late 1960s and the deception
37 that ensued. Its censorship should therefore come as no surprise.

38 What is surprising is how filmmakers remember the film's censorship
39 today. Nelson Rodríguez, Solás's then life partner and the film's editor
40 and co-scriptwriter, recalled that at the time he and Solás had been
41 furious with Guevara. But over the years, he explained, he had come to

1 realize that Guevara had only been trying to protect them in the climate
2 of institutionalized homophobia and censorship of the *quinquenio gris*:

3
4 They fired everyone, they removed all of the gays – famous theatre
5 directors, actors – they kicked everyone out and in the ICRT they did
6 exactly the same thing. Alfredo didn't touch anyone. Because Alfredo
7 was very careful, and here they didn't touch anyone. But at what price?
8 They shelved *Un día de noviembre*. 'This film can't be released now
9 because we release this film and just imagine those who are waiting to
10 see what we will do!' You had two very important names there because
11 you had Humberto and you had me. ... They would have kicked both
12 of us out and he [Guevara] didn't allow that. And he also didn't allow
13 us to go abroad until everything was over. He took care of him! That
14 was a way of taking care of him. In that moment we didn't see it like
15 that. We were really upset, angry, and everything but afterwards, with
16 time, we realized that Alfredo had managed the situation very intelli-
17 gently. In the ICAIC they didn't touch anyone. That's the truth.

18 (Rodríguez, 26 October 2008)

19
20 In this case what seemed at first to 'its victims' a bald exercise of repres-
21 sion, revealed itself retrospectively as a form of care. Unlike many gay
22 artists at other cultural institutions, Rodríguez and Solás remained
23 active in their profession during those difficult years, making experi-
24 mental but far less controversial films.

25 If in this story blatant censorship turned out to be something other
26 than what it initially seemed, a more recent case demonstrates the
27 wisdom of the old adage, 'just because you're paranoid doesn't mean
28 they're not out to get you'. In an interview in 2008, I asked actor Luis
29 Alberto García if he had ever been censored. 'Of course I've suffered
30 censorship', he responded, 'there's censorship in Cuba, there's a lot, and
31 it's the worst kind of censorship that exists, veiled censorship' (García,
32 12 March 2008). In 2005, García starred in Eduardo del Llano's inde-
33 pendent digital short, *Monte rouge*. In the short, García/Nicanor answers
34 a knock at his door to find the secret police. Everyone was complaining
35 that they were always working in secret, they explain, so they're trying
36 a new tactic: they've arrived openly to install microphones in García/
37 Nicanor's apartment. Rejected by all major Cuban film festivals but cir-
38 culated widely by hand in Cuba on flash drives and posted to Internet
39 sites abroad, *Monte Rouge* quickly attracted international attention.
40 Shortly after its release, García reported, he proudly told a CNN reporter
41 that he hadn't suffered any consequences for acting in the piece. 'One

1 month later', he continued, 'I was banned from working [in television]
2 for 11 months' (García, 12 March 2008).

3 The bitter irony was that his censorship proved the 'joke' of *Monte*
4 *rouge*. When I asked García how he learned that he had been censored,
5 he explained:

6
7 They don't tell you directly. You find out because a director tells you,
8 'I tried to hire you and they're telling me no. I can't use you or the
9 other actor'. And the other director with whom we had worked was
10 told, 'You have to cut those scenes in which Luis [and the other actor]
11 appears', and he refused. And so you hear stories and more stories and
12 I said, 'I want to see in writing that they have banned me from work-
13 ing'. 'Nobody has banned you from working'. 'But how is it possible
14 that nobody has banned me from working and yet they're not letting
15 directors hire me?' And so I knocked on doors and complained and
16 nobody listened to me until the affair reached the Ministry of Culture
17 and then Abel [Prieto] said, 'Wait a minute, this can't be this way'.

18 (García, 12 March 2008)

19
20 Proud to proclaim to the world that in Cuba one could make a criti-
21 cal short with relative impunity, García felt 'ridiculous' when his own
22 experience belied his assertion. Yet the most maddening aspect of his
23 censorship for him was that it was insufficiently overt. Rather than fac-
24 ing a traceable prohibition, he was left knocking on doors, struggling to
25 locate and confront the decision makers until another political leader
26 intervened on his behalf in a meeting that took place behind equally
27 closed doors.

28 When asked about political decisions, my Cuban friends and inter-
29 locutors would frequently refer to a zone 'higher up', accompanying
30 the statement with a vague hand gesture towards the air. Such gestures
31 make clear Cubans' pervasive sense of living with a hierarchical and
32 inscrutable state. A much circulated story about the 1971 National
33 Congress of Culture and Education that launched the *quinquenio gris*
34 exemplifies the symptomologies used by intellectuals to decipher the
35 state's workings. Director Arturo Sotto recounted:

36
37 Armando Quesada was in charge in this Congress of delivering the crit-
38 ical pronouncements on cultural institutions. And the day that he was
39 prepared to criticize cinema was the day that Fidel arrived and put his
40 arm around Alfredo, or so goes the legend. That is to say, Fidel in some
41 way prevented or tried to control the situation that was happening

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1 novel possibilities presented by digital technologies for circumventing
2 state control over the media and forming alternative publics. Film critic
3 Gustavo Arcos argued that the state recognized the threat to its control
4 over the public sphere:

6 Certain figures of the government tried to close down the debate.
7 Because it had been produced in a spontaneous, independent, and alter-
8 native way, they were overwhelmed by it and couldn't control it as they
9 had in other eras. What sense is there in trying to control information
10 if we live in a world in which information flows everywhere? The state
11 still acts with the outdated mentality that they control the media when
12 the opposite is true and the proof is this situation with the emails.

13 (Arcos, 26 May 2008)

15 Intellectuals attributed a number of 'wins' in the battle against censor-
16 ship to the email exchanges: the television release of several ICAIC films
17 that the ICRT had previously censored, Raúl Castro's organization of
18 forums where the government heard people's complaints in the summer
19 of 2007, the growing movement of Cuban bloggers. Subsequent acts of
20 censorship have been met with smaller flurries of email exchanges that
21 cite the email war as their precedent, producing the effect of an ongoing
22 and unified demand for a free and open public sphere. Yet the paranoia
23 that wove through every effort to provide a forum for dialogue beyond
24 that of email during the war, along with the suspicion that every new
25 intervention masked hidden political complicities, reveal an anxiety
26 about how to recognize freedom of speech that suggests that 'open'
27 would never be 'open enough' to guarantee the democratic public
28 sphere idealized by intellectuals.

29 This dynamic has structural affinities with late liberal societies. In
30 those contexts, political scientist Jodi Dean (2002) argues, the fantasy
31 of a secret preserves the ideology of a democratic public despite its
32 perpetual failure to appear. If we have not yet achieved a democratic
33 public that can guarantee rule through consent instead of coercion,
34 then this is because more has yet to be revealed: 'Something or someone
35 stands right outside us, our knowledge and our visibility, withholding
36 our legitimacy from us, preventing us from realizing the rightness that
37 we claim, that should be ours'. But the secret masks only the non-exist-
38 ence of this public in the first place, its wishful papering over of the
39 actual antagonisms that divide the social.

40 Contrary to late liberal contexts, Cuban intellectuals begin from the
41 assumption that a rational, open public does *not* exist. Yet here too the

1 secret operates as fantasy, securing the belief that once the secrets of
2 the state have finally and fully been revealed then a democratic public,
3 one that would embrace all Cubans regardless of their political beliefs,
4 would at last come into being. For many Cuban intellectuals and for ana-
5 lysts of non-democratic regimes more generally, digital technologies seem
6 ideal weapons in the fight for democracy against secretive and repressive
7 states.⁹ With the aid of email, Internet, cell phones and digital cameras,
8 Cuban intellectuals are bringing to light political and social problems
9 generally excluded from public media. To return to Gustavo Arcos's words
10 cited above, 'Information flows everywhere' (Arcos, 26 May 2008). But the
11 paranoia that sparked and propelled the email war cautions against tech-
12 nological determinism. Cuban intellectuals vacillate between optimism
13 about the potential of digital technologies to escape state control and war-
14 iness of a censorship that has, in response, become more unpredictable,
15 anonymous, and difficult to detect with certainty. As in the technocratic
16 late liberal cultures described by Dean, this matrix of secrecy and revela-
17 tion sets in motion an endless cycle of suspicion and surveillance as texts,
18 interventions, events, are converted into signs of covert machinations to
19 monopolize power and keep the vast majority out of the know.

20 'We were all sick with paranoia', wrote Reina María Rodríguez, recall-
21 ing how in a 1994 encounter between islanders and exiles in Stockholm,
22 Sweden, they 'insulted each other first in the meeting and hugged each
23 other afterwards in the corridors, as though the two shores united in
24 those ephemeral embraces' (Consenso, 2007). Faced with the often
25 complicated and frequently veiled motivations, beliefs, allegiances
26 and power struggles between different actors in the Cuban cultural
27 and political field, paranoia develops into a genre of political discourse
28 whose predictable conventions can provide a treacherous relief. Genre,
29 as Lauren Berlant (2008) teaches us, is not merely discursive but also
30 profoundly affective, providing us with the reassurances of conven-
31 tion. While political paranoia leads Cubans to anxiously scan events
32 and statements for hidden political motivations, it can also provide the
33 certainty of an answer: Pavón is a puppet and Fidel Castro the puppet
34 master; Guevara defended his artists while Pavón executed repressive
35 orders with excessive relish and disastrous consequences. Even as digital
36 technologies open up new opportunities for criticism and debate, the
37 resulting transformation in censorship strategies can often exacerbate
38 recourse to these old certainties. These are poor comforts for the many
39 Cubans who would like to dismantle the long-standing political stand-
40 off between revolutionaries and dissidents, those who denounce Cuba
41 as totalitarian in an effort to attack the heart of political repression and

those who continue to believe that socialism can be revolutionized through criticism from within.

Notes

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1. See Desiderio Navarro (2007) and Antonio José Ponte (2010) for opposing analyses of these events. Navarro recounts the quick response of intellectuals on the island to the TV appearances while Ponte criticizes some island intellectuals for failing to demand accountability from Fidel Castro. Here I argue that both sides of the debate respond to the inscrutability of the state with a paranoid symptomology that reinforces political divides.
2. Paul Ryer (2006) traces the tradition of political paranoia in Cuba even farther back to the nineteenth century.
3. To have *doblo moral* means to say or think something other than what one secretly believes or does. An *oportunista* is someone who only aligns herself with current political trends for the sake of personal advantages. These are commonly deployed accusations.
4. All quotes from field notes and interviews with Cuban intellectuals have been translated from Spanish to English by the author.
5. All emails can be found on the website of the dissident Cuban magazine, *Consenso*, hereafter cited as (Consenso, 2007). Quotes from emails have been translated from Spanish by the author.
6. Arturo Arango, for instance, explained, 'I didn't really think that [Pavón's appearance] was a central action of the government, but I did think that that group was trying to regain the positions they had lost' (Arango, 1 October 2008).
7. See letters by Arturo Arango, Belkis Vega and Orlando Hernández writing from the island, as well as the first letters by Amir Valle and Magaly Muguercia writing from abroad (Consenso, 2007).
8. See letters from Belkis Cuza Malé and Paquito d'Rivera for examples of the first position and from Belkis Vega for the second (Consenso, 2007).
9. A full account of this literature is beyond the scope of this chapter, but see Cristina Venegas (2010) for an analysis of debates about the Internet and democracy in Cuba.

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