Cafecito with Lester Hamlet (2025)

Venue: University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus

Moderators: Dr. Jorge González Díaz and Prof. Carlos García Arce

Translation: Alejandro Álvarez Nieves

Introduction

RAMARIS:

I am Dr. Ramaris Albert Trinidad, from the Information and Journalism major, and I want to give you our warmest welcome to this, the first of the "Cafecitos" that we will be celebrating this week at our Río Piedras Campus, as part of the Mellon Fellowships for High Impact Scholars, Artists, and Journalists initiative. This activity is possible thanks to the support and collaboration of the University of Texas at Austin, which has allowed us to establish this agreement, in which the academics who have been part of this experience for a year, on their campus, come to Puerto Rico to publicize their creative and research projects.

As part of that initiative, this morning, we will have a "Cafecito" that is fully linked to the courses that bring them to this activity today... related to feature films, screenplays, and the field of cinema, since Cuban filmmaker Lester Hamlet will be joining us this morning.

Before we begin with the presentation of our guest, we will be accompanied by professors Carlos García Arce and Dr. Jorge González Díaz, who will kindly co-host this activity as experts in the field. In the case of Dr. Jorge González Díaz, he is a professor at the College of Communication and Information at the University of Puerto Rico, and has served for more than twenty years as director and screenwriter of radio, television, film, and theater. His works have been produced in New York, Los Angeles, Havana, Buenos Aires, and San Juan. His screenwriting credits include the documentary *Más allá de las murallas*: *500 años de historia de la ciudad de San Juan* [Beyond the walls: 500 years of San Juan history] and the play *Los lunes a las 9:00* [Mondays at 9:00], the film *Mal de amores* [Love sickness], and the play *Los coyotes*, winner of the national PEN playwriting contest in Puerto Rico. González Díaz is also a musician, singer, songwriter, and a founding member of the "punk rock" group for children, Los Mocosos. In the case of Professor Carlos García Arce, who is also with us this morning,

Professor Carlos García Arce is an assistant professor at the College of Communication and Information in the Audiovisual Communication major, where he offers courses in film production, television production, and screenwriting. He has a master's degree in screenwriting, narrative, and audiovisual creativity from the College of Communication at the University of Seville and a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies, specializing in filmmaking from the College of Humanities at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus. He is a PhD student in the Inter-University Doctorate in Communication at the University of Málaga. Since 1994, he has worked on multiple film and audiovisual projects, both fiction and documentary, holding positions of direction, cinematography, screenplay, editing, and production.

Welcome. Before handing things over to my colleagues, I also want to thank and recognize the presence of the director of Radio Universidad, Mrs. Susanne Marte, and of our dean of the College of Communication and Information, Dr. Julia Vélez González. Thank you for joining us.

CARLOS:

Well, I want to greet and welcome to everyone. Thank you for being here, joining us this morning. Thanks to the guests of the "Cafecitos" project. Thanks to Caribe Digital and the College of Humanities for inviting us to this... This interesting and important initiative, and on behalf of the College of Communication and Information, well, we welcome them, we tell them that we are here, and also thank our guest Lester Hamlet, who will be with us. My colleague Jorge González will read you his biography.

JORGE:

Well, thank you very much for being here and thanks to filmmaker Lester Hamlet for the visit to the University of Puerto Rico.

Lester Hamlet is a renowned and award-winning Cuban filmmaker. At international film festivals, he has excelled as director of films such as *Tres veces dos* [Three times two], in 2003, for which he won the Silver Cenit for best film at the Montreal World Film Festival. His film *Casa vieja* [Old house] from 2010; *Fábula* [Fable], from 2011, have also been awarded at festivals and feature films. His most recent feature film, *Ya no es antes* [It's not before anymore] in 2016, received awards such as the Audience Choir Award at the International Latin American Film Festival and the Grand Prize for the Best Form of Fiction at the Eighth International Festival of Poor Cinema. Hamlet trained himself as a filmmaker in his native

Cuba. He obtained a degree in Film Direction from the Instituto Superior de Arte de Cuba, and graduated from the Cuban International Film and Television School as editor, art director, and screenwriter. As a director, he has been in charge of not only movies, but also more than 300 music videos. In addition, he directed the 56 episodes that make up the Cuban telenovela *Tú*, broadcast by Cubavisión. He has also directed plays, galas, and festivals. Beyond directing, his professional experience in the audiovisual field includes production, art direction, screenwriting, and editing. Hamlet's professional background has allowed him not only to create, but also to evaluate films. He has been a judge at film festivals, competitions, and events. He has also put his knowledge at the service of students, working as a teacher of theater, acting, and film production. He is currently a Scholar of the Mellon Foundation, Mellon Fellowship for High Impact Scholars. The Mellon Fellowship makes this UPR Caribe Digital project and the "Cafecitos" initiative possible.
Now, without further ado, Lester Hamlet.

LESTER:

Thank you very much, good afternoon. Truly, I know this is something people say: "It's a pleasure." But for me, it's a real pleasure to be here in Puerto Rico with you. First of all, I want to deeply thank the Mellon Foundation for the opportunity it has given us this year's fellows. And for the previous ones, for having a space to think in peace. I want to thank the University of Puerto Rico, too, for welcoming us, for having prepared this event so desired by me. There are no... There are no words to express this emotion.
I'm Cuban, you know what they say: "Cuba and Puerto Rico are the wings of the same bird." There are many things that make us similar and unite us, even the most remarkable, the simplest. I've been banished from my country; I cannot return to my country. Being in Puerto Rico is like a *déjà vu* from that country of mine. When we were leaving the airport, my partner Luz Mely opened the taxi window, and they had just cut the grass. Smelling that made me feel the smell Cuba again. I thank you for the experience of living a Little Cuba, right? To remember Cuba with that sea that you can see here from every corner, a city that I have filmed so many times, my own... And the welcome, and that all of you are gathered here. It's very beautiful, because I was you until I grew old. I, too, was in the classroom listening to my teachers talk about so many interesting points, and it's really nice to try to offer you something I've learned or experienced.

I want to base my conversation today on a documentary that has just been released, made at the University of Texas by one of their Spanish teachers, who is also a film scholar: Jack.

Because of my closeness, I am the son of a literature teacher and a producer of theatrical shows, which meant that baby Lester was sleeping in the corner of the stage, that baby Lester was always in that world, and of course, it's a very addictive world, and it ends up fascinating me. As a child, the world of opera, the zarzuela, theatrical entertainment was also part of my life, and for me, that was acting. For me, acting was going on stage... That... that epic, great thing, that is the world of lyrical art... was acting. One of the fundamental pieces that I remember from my childhood was *Cecilia Valdés*. And already when I grew up—I think that's why it was very interesting to me, and it was like an event that existed—they were releasing a Cuban film called *Cecilia*, inspired by the novel, in which the zarzuela was also inspired. So, perhaps, as a child, the film that impressed me the most, for that reason, was *Cecilia*. And another film that I remember a lot in my childhood—because of my mom, because my mom really liked it—was *Lucía.* So, let's say they're like the two Cuban film references that caught my attention. These are definitely two works, coincidentally, *Cecilia* and *Lucía*, by Humberto Solás, one of the greatest masters of Cuban cinema. And really, it was really inspiring to learning about them. In becoming acquainted the works, I already fell in love with the world of cinema.

The Cuban Film School and Its Versatility

LESTER:

The world of cinema also allowed me a lot when I was already part of it. First, I went through everything: from being an assistant, script, super assistant, meritorious of a film... Until I managed to direct, which I think is something that is very important. There is something that I really like about the Cuban school, especially the international school, and that is that it creates polyvalence in students. A student can make sound today, but tomorrow they are going to sit down and assemble the work, or they can photograph it... And all of a sudden, right? There is like an interaction at the school level, which is wonderful, from the world of cinema, and very necessary. And that's how I was trained. Me.

Exile in His Work

LESTER:

Also, within the thematic world, Cuba, it is undeniable that we have to refer to... to... to exile... We are islanders, we know, a little, what this is about. Above all, in Cuba, with a regime. Now, later, we'll talk more about that, but because of the prevailing communism on the island, there are a lot of people who have decided to leave. Many jump into the sea and don't make it. Others are succeeding to avoid this unhappiness.

Excerpt from "Ya no es antes"

LESTER:

This is an excerpt from *Ya no es antes* [It's not before anymore], which is the most recent film.

(An excerpt from *Ya no es antes* is played)

CHARACTER 1:

(Singing) You who says that yours is not so good…

CHARACTER 2:

(Singing) I invite you to search the world for another sky as blue as my sky.

CHARACTER 1:

(Singing) A moon as bright as the one that seeps into the sweetness of the cane. A...

CHARACTER 2:

Go on!

LESTER:

The problem of censorship—and the harm of this type of imperative, dictatorial societies, such as Cuba—is a damage that, in some way, is already anthropological. Although there are those who censor you, there is—and it's even more serious—whatever you censor about yourself... This self-censorship occurring in you. There is a desire in you, which is to tell a story, to tell a film. Although my films always have a critical point towards many aspects of Cuban society—

historical, present, future, contemporary or not—there had to be a very fine line on how to handle it.

(Excerpt from *Fábula* is played)

CHARACTER:
All my life, I have given one hundred percent to this country. All my life, working my best to bring us forward, because I've never liked that people leave. Those who leave are idiots. But it's different when the idiots belong to the family. I've always wanted what's best for you. I don't want you to spend your life working, busting your ass to end up... fucked. In hiding... like me.

LESTER
I remember, for example, when *Tres veces dos...* when Lila…Consider that the film is being made, the film is written, the script is reviewed, the film is being filmed, the script is being revised, the film is being edited and seen by the president, the producers, all those who could or would be the censors... When I had that first screening of Lila, I remember that the then president of the ICAIC, who was Omar González, told me that there was an issue with the film. It was that, for the first time in the movies, the hero... Which, in this case, was the one who had been… he had risen up to fight for the revolution... The one who... The one who, in some way, was the example and the one who always, in the Cuban revolution, saw himself as the hero, the leader... It was the first time that, in Cuban cinema, the hero was the traitor—he betrayed love. But that, on the contrary, Lila never mistreated the flag. I was struck by his observation. Of course, I knew that the hero was a traitor, that's what I wanted to talk about; to break that pattern of being perfect, divinized. The hero betrayed love, even with the same words with which he fell in love. [Film audio] And that's the way it was... But that's how censorship works. Self-censorship worked that way. How do I not betray myself too much, and manage to tell what I want to say? It was... I... I, in an interview I gave here, spoke of the fact that you try to walk as if you were camouflaged. So, using my camouflage, I tried to send my messages like this—heroes betray.
It is a tribute to listen to the music composed for that film by Edesio Alejandro, one of our greatest film musicians, who won the national film award, who has just died. So, plenty of light for Edesio. "Oh, poor me..." And also, that introduces me to tell you about the reality in which you operate in Cuba's art world.

"With the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing"

LESTER:

In 1961, at a great meeting where Fidel's words were captured in this regard, a slogan of socialism in Cuba was announced and made clear, which is, "With the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing." The terms "with" and "against" are very specific. Everything they felt could be a message against the process they were waging, was seen as the enemy, the disastrous, the thing that couldn't happen. And, historically, there has been a lot of persecution, a lot of censorship, a lot of limitations to what we filmmakers can count on with our work.

Exile of Cuban artists

LESTER:

Perhaps that is the reason why, historically, Cuban culture has seen its best children say goodbye to their country. It is a permanent exile for generations. We can quote from film masters, such as Sergio Giral, Orlando Rojas, to something, and I'm not afraid to be absolute, to all my friends, and not just the directors. When you're in Florida, in Miami, you see that there is everyone who made sound, the photographers, the camera operators, the editors. I don't know who is making films in Cuba, because the cinematographic caste has really left there. It's tough. So, historically, in my movies, the characters either come back to the country, or they want to go, or they're leaving the country. It's like a *leitmotif* in my work. I never thought that I would be in that position where I placed a lot of my characters. I did not leave. They wouldn't let me go back. I went... I went out to breathe a little. I took advantage, and I went out. I certainly didn't know if I was going to come back, but it was my option. Even though my energy told me that I didn't want to return, I didn't return to Cuba because they didn't let me return. And I didn't understand it. And I was upset, I was saddened. And all of a sudden, I understood everything that communism was. I understood something that a great friend had always told me, that Cuba is not a country. You cannot understand Cuba, nor can you analyze Cuba as you would analyze a country, because in Cuba there are no freedoms. Cuba is a farm with a team of owners who have schools that don't work, hospitals that don't work, services they provide to a group of people who live on that farm, including me. I firmly believe that what was not worth it was devoting so much time to that country, to that place on Earth. When I got out, people tell me: "No, but you made four movies." I say: "What are they worth? Yes,

they're there, I can show them. Of course I'm proud of my movies, but I'm not proud of myself. I'm not proud of the person I forbade myself to be, living there." The whole situation of precariousness, absences, blackouts, lack of food, medicine, lack of services, yes, is terrible... It's terrible. But the fundamental thing is an entire country surviving a deception. A whole country trying to spend one more day in the midst of a lie that they can't escape.

(An excerpt from *Fábula* is reproduced).

CHARACTER 1:
Since when are you seeing each other?... When, Cecilia?

CHARACTER 2:
Ever since I told you to paint, more or less... I'm sorry, really. We were not in a good place; he came back and...

CHARACTER 1:
You sacrificed yourself for the family. Have you told him about me?

CHARACTER 2:
Of course. About you, about the girl...

CHARACTER 1:
What did he say?

CHARACTER 2:
That I was very fortunate to have them and... And you for having me.

CHARACTER 1:
And you slept with him? In the end, you didn't sacrifice so much, Cecilia. I'm sure he has blue eyes, right?

CHARACTER 2:
I like yours better.

CHARACTER 1:

Really? How much?

CHARACTER 2:

A lot...

CHARACTER 1:

It's late, Cecilia. Let's go back home. Or do you prefer to go to his?

CHARACTER 2:

Arturo...

(Music from movie)

Lying as a survival mechanism

LESTER:

In Cuba, the act of lying becomes a very everyday action, like survival. We see this marriage here, as idyllic, of this young couple and he doesn't know, or didn't know until then, that she was prostituting herself so that the family would survive, right? Lying doesn't just happen at very high levels. The lie is on your side; the lie is in your life. The lie, in Cuba, is almost part of you. You must be very careful, because it entangles you, you fall into that trap. Above all, in that society that has been so demonstrative and so false. I was now commenting to the professor that—notice how anthropological the damage it does—that I still have, almost three years after having—and not already being in Cuba—I still have a little trouble talking about communism, treason, isn't it? It's like, we're programmed into something very ugly that happens to Cubans inside the island. Above all, at a stage—until the appearance of the Internet, and until the approval of being able to use the Internet on the island—of a lot of disinformation... Of a lot of disinformation and of being very detached from what the real world is, how it survives, how it exists in the real world.

The Insular Curse

(An excerpt from a documentary about Lester is reproduced.)

LESTER IN THE DOCUMENTARY:

But the thing is that we are an island, and not cinema, art as a whole has to serve for growing. All Cubans should know Virgilio [Piñera] and know his poem and his poetry, and know when he said: "The damn condition of water everywhere." Being an island is a curse. The horizon is there, but how do I get there? If in that damned condition of knowing that you are an islander, of knowing that you are surrounded by water and by a horizon that defines you that you fit in there. You're part of a *Truman Show* or a "Castro Show," right? It's complicated... It's complicated... But that's also what cinema is for, to learn from metaphors or, in everyday life, to understand your reality and above all how to modify it.

(Excerpt from *Fábula* begins).

CHARACTER 1:

Oh, how beautiful.

LESTER:

Now, with this scene from *Fábula*, we move on to you, please, and to the professors.

(Scene from *Fábula* continues).

CHARACTER 2:

I have a buddy who says that, if you look closely at night, you can see the lights of Miami.

CHARACTER 1:

What a silly thing.

CHARACTER 2:

My aunts want me to leave.

(End fragment of *Fábula*).

JORGE:

Thank you, Lester.

(The audience applauds.)

Doubts and Questions

JORGE:

I think it's really great that you're here today, in front of a group of students. Also, that they are students—many, many of them—communications students, future filmmakers, screenwriters, editors of Puerto Rican and Puerto Rican cultural work... And that I think it's really great that you're here and that you share this story that converses with the experiences they have, that we have, and that we're going to have on this island as well. For this reason, I think it is very relevant, and we appreciate this moment. I wanted to know if any students would like to ask Lester a question.

PROFESSOR 1:

Hello. I'm struck by that process that you're telling us about, that you're talking about living in self-censorship, right? Which is a psychological state of torture, of psychological torture. We know this, because we come from the countries we come from. How did you make that quantum leap of making four feature films—I think it is, or three feature films—that is, of getting out of that self-censorship? What was that experience like, realizing that you were self-censoring, and being able to carry out your cinematographic work, while living in censorship and self-censorship?

LESTER:

Yes, a bit like I said there, which was like walking around not being exposed, not being in disguise and being very subtle with the messages I wanted to give, because I knew a little about the implications or what was happening. Let's do this in order. I am not the bravest of Cubans. There are much more courageous Cubans, and there are many Cubans, right now, who are in prison, thousands of Cubans imprisoned for exercising their right to express themselves peacefully, in all cases, and they are in prison. I'm not a politician, let's say, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to tell a story so that people would feel and see that I was honest. There are topics that if I couldn't touch, I know I couldn't touch them. I never chose—perhaps cowardly—I never chose to get into trouble. It was—It was terrible until a certain point, because all this build-up brings you to a place where you're fed up. There is a song by... from a Cuban singer that I recommend to all of you, in your generation, a lot, called Carlos

Varela. Carlos Varela has a song called “El leñador sin bosque” [The woodcutter without a forest] that describes me absolutely, now. In one of his verses, he says: “I’d rather be forgotten than be the jester.” I felt that they could already use me as a jester, and I preferred not to be there anymore. I preferred to leave a lifetime behind. Leaving behind an entire life is literally that—leaving behind an entire life. Not just objects, but my physical belonging, everything. An audience, a tradition...

Those who want to see my social networks are invited. On Instagram, I’m Lester Hamlet Cuba, and on Facebook, I’m Lester Hamlet Veira Rodríguez. I constantly upload content from my work, from my own thoughts. And it’s really nice how the people there respond to me, isn’t it? But it is achieved with great difficulty, it is achieved with great difficulty... Or with great impudence.

The Story is What Matters

LESTER:

There are a lot of things that are very shameless. Right now, I was playing them excerpts from, from this film, from *Fábula*. Also, the thing is, that I don’t... I have four movies, but not all of them were paid for by the ICAIC. *Fábula*, for example, is an economically Canadian film. So, when you see *Fábula*, the sets are my house. My living room was the living room of two of the characters, and my room was painted, one wall or another. The purpose of telling a story is to tell it. Guys, in that, really, never have any... Is it scruples? Maybe it’s not the most appropriate word, but put it all into the telling of the story. I don’t, I don’t remember how many days I didn’t sleep in my bed because my house, every day, was the set. So, we were finishing shooting, and art direction would paint this wall one color, move this piece of furniture over here, bring the other one, right? Because we didn’t have money to rent houses, or to build sets. All of these things, you should have them, because all the resources you have to tell the story... Nothing will make you happier... Let me see those in the back, how beautiful they are from afar, there. Nothing will make them happier, throughout your lives, than to feel that you told what you wanted to tell, even if, like me, they have to hide a little behind a wall so that the truths are not slaps in the face, and so that, whatever you can tell, they reach an audience.

CARLOS:

Anyone else has any questions? I have a few, but I would like to hear questions from students first.

How to Find a Topic

CARLOS:

Well, I'm going to do one to see if you get inspired there. Well, actually, two... A question in two parts, which maybe... that maybe are integrated. One is: How, how do you approach a topic? The students, at least in my course, are in the process of choosing the script with which they are going to make their short film. So how do you find that topic, those underlying issues, beyond what happens to the character, beyond understanding the character, those issues that you're talking about? At the very least, how...? How do you...?

LESTER:

How did it happen to me?

CARLOS:

Exactly, how did you find your topic? And then, perhaps, to connect a little with something else that we talk a lot about... it's talking about what we know, talking about experience, from experience, right? So, I suppose it's not the same thing when you leave the place that was the context in which you've been, and you go to another place.

LESTER:

Exactly.

CARLOS:

And you have to create there, or you decide to create there. How do you deal with that, right? How... how... how do you work with that? Because...

LESTER:

Are you talking like in the future?

CARLOS:

Right now.

LESTER:

Well, first of all... In my case, I come from the theater. The first thing I studied was theater. Therefore, I have some knowledge about the theatrical literature of my country—works and authors that interested me. So, I'm researching a lot, or it has happened to me... For example, *Casa vieja* [Old house] is an adaptation of a Cuban play from the '60s called *La casa vieja.* I knew that, within that work, there was a dramatic core that I always felt that, updating it, updating things, putting it in the current era, making distances longer, which is ultimately what has happened... If the main character used to come from another state to Havana, in my film he already comes from another country to Cuba, to make it mean more. The '60s are not the same as the 2000s. Then, to use what I knew as the dramatic core of that—of that work—in my purpose. Bring it very close to me. A phrase from that film, which is the final one, that has been like an imprint on my life that is: "I believe in what is alive and changes." And I, like that character too, believe in what is alive and changes. Things aren't that permanent. Nothing is permanent. Not even a rock in the sea is permanent. The same sea wears it down and transforms it gradually.

In the case of *Fábula*, which is my second feature film, it comes from a short story by a Cuban writer Alberto Garrández, who in creative workshops suggested texts to read, and I fell in love with "Fábula." And I've been doing that script, what can I say, for like five years. It was a three-page short story. But there is another case that is *Tres veces dos*, my story of Lila. The inspiration was my great aunt, that character lives what my great aunt experienced. She fell in love with a rebel, she gave herself to him, which was quite difficult at that time— giving her virginity to someone without marrying. We are talking about the 1950s. She ran away from home to go with him, they promised each other eternal love, and he never returned. She, all her life, kept a box where she made some bracelets that guerrilla fighters used to identify themselves. He asked her, "Make me bracelets, and when I come down again, I'll pick them up, and tin this way, I can see you." Those bracelets, my great aunt, really, had them all her life. When my great aunt died, I wanted to tell her story, but I wanted to give her spirit the gift that he would return. That's a gift that I give to my great aunt's soul in my film. Therefore, the motivations for telling a story are dissimilar, infinite. It depends only on you.

Be the Creator in Your Story

LESTER:

I have a bit of a hysterical experience, to say the least. But, to tell you, who are students, that's fine. When I went to take on my first film, as a director, of course, my assistant director had

already done thirty-odd films, and had worked with all the directors. And I ask him, “What color do you think it will be?” And he says, “No, don’t tell me what color you want me to think of, because I don’t think. If you’re going to make a movie, you have to feel that you’re God. You are going to create your world in your image, to what you want to tell about that world. If, for you, the house is green, here is a team of people to paint your house green. If you want it red, it’s red. But that’s for a reason that’s in you, because you’re the God of this story. You create it. The same way you create science fiction, you create reality, or the appearance of the reality you want to tell.” And that lesson was very valid. That is, not so that you believe you’re God, because we cannot reach those aberrant levels of ego, but so that they know that it is in your hands to create a world, and it is in your hands to always have the answers for the team. Cinema is not something we do alone. Cinema is not something we do with two people. There is a team. That team will always come looking for the questions in you. Always have all your answers ready, don’t digress. “What color do you want the character of the girl who is at the first table?” “No, I want it blue.” “Blue?” “Yes.” You know that you want it blue, because the one that is farther back is in red, and that way you will notice it better. An example that I give them at random... But the director is responsible for everything, and so you have to know well what story you want to tell, what is the world you want to ask them to portray. So, they become involved. I do tell them; one thing they can never stop is reading... or living. Don’t live a passive life. Filmmakers don’t have a passive life. Filmmakers are observers at all times. Almost like journalists, but they have a vision, let’s say, more elaborate, more created. The journalist tells reality; the filmmaker creates a reality to convey a message.

Rediscovering Your Center in Exile

LUZ MELY:

Hello, Lester.

LESTER:

Hello, Luz.

LUZ MELY:

How nice! How beautiful you... your metaphor and your comparison of when you smelled that wet dirt, isn't it?

LESTER:
Indeed.

LUZ MELY:
Indeed. Look, the professor I think introduced something about the question that I would like us to talk about, and it's the author. In other words, you get out of things, but you too, as an author now, have experienced a process. And I would like you to talk about how that process affects, intervenes, makes your creative process prettier—I don't know. And I'm referring, specifically, to the decision that you couldn't enter your country, and the impact that could have on you and your work.

LESTER:
Oh, dear... There's definitely another Lester right now. There's a more... more focused Lester. Leaving the country—not because of your own decision, but because they impose your exile on you—is also an opportunity. This is always an opportunity to try or search for your center where they have placed you. If my center used to depend on my country, my house, my city, my friends, and my environment, I had to look for my center in myself, which is something that I deeply thank the Mellon Foundation, because it has allowed me that time of reflection, of re-recognizing who I am at this exact moment in my existence. The screenplays that I have been able to write—set forward—during this time bear witness to that. Everyone watches the news. And everyone is even shocked when they see the reports on people who cross deserts, the river, cross bridges, face all kinds of obstacles... But living through it is another thing. As I experienced it, I experienced my own journey. I have my physical signs, my breaks from that journey, beyond the emotional pain. And that's in a screenplay. That's already a screenplays that I hope, at some point, at some point, will find interested producers to be able to execute it, because it was my experience. Even during the journey, on the days when you are imprisoned waiting to be released, waiting for everything... Days of great uncertainty... I talked to my cellmates, and they told me their experience to support mine, to learn about other stories beyond the one I experienced. Yes, it's hard, but it's an opportunity, because life is an opportunity every day. If this hadn't happened, how do I get to meet you? How do I get to know Talita? How do I get to know Agnes? How do I find out about the university? How would I

have come to Puerto Rico? I have a way of projecting my life that is not for the worse, but for something else. Doing it for worse or for good is up to you. Then, there is another thing too, maybe you know him because he is one of our most important voices, he is our poet José Martí. José Martí said that we must go to the best of humankind so that the worst does not prevail. Without a doubt, the best thing about me is my creation. So, to never stop creating has been the motivation to continue to be joyful and to continue to be proud of this process, dear Luz Mely.

PERSON 1:
She wanted to ask something.

The Moment of Freedom

STUDENT 2:
Greetings, Lester. What I wanted to ask you was that, obviously, you went through some very difficult processes... Having to leave your country, having to leave everything you knew, and having to, from one moment to the next, enter a new world and see how to fall into that new world... In all that process, when was it that you could finally feel a little bit of freedom?...

LESTER:
One day, having just arrived, one day I am sitting in the dining room of my family's house—listen to this—and I see that, on the side of the fence, there is a person taking pictures. "Oh God, they already found me." "Listen to that, they already found me." "They're coming to get me." "They found my house." That paranoia. It was as simple as the fact that the Amazon delivery person had left a package, and was taking the confirmation photo. And they tell me... And my family tells me: "Here, the greatest leaders of the Cuban exile live here, and nothing happens to them, what is going to happen to you?" But listen, at what point can the paranoia with which you get out of there, of feeling persecuted, of feeling that it is part of the fact that you are hated by a system or that they feel that you are hurting them can be complicated, right? I came to feel freedom, really, when I came here to Austin, for the scholarship. Where I no longer... I was no longer with a family member; I had to do everything for myself. And to see that I, as a normal person, went to a condominium, applied for an apartment, they saw my papers, they saw my record of, what's it called, my credit report. They saw everything. I rented

my apartment, went, moved. When I saw that I had operability and freedom of action, I was very, very happy. Not only because of the practical fact that I was able to do things for myself, but because that meant, first, that time had passed, that I had already gained some legality of staying in the United States—which is becoming more and more complex—and thirdly, that an adventure was beginning that depended solely on me, right? Not feeling that also makes you feel free. And there it was. And when, not writing, because I always wrote in freedom. What I didn't do in freedom was to delete things I had written that I felt might bother, right? Disguising them... That's worse. But, definitely, Austin was the one set to the feeling of freedom within this... Within this stage.

CARLOS:
Any other questions or reactions from the public?

Ideas Converted into Projects

STUDENT 3:
Based on your experience, and everything you've experienced, what can you recommend to us, right? What things do you have to tell us about the experience that awaits us, and what should we do, right, to be able to transmit our ideas, our messages, our stories to the screen?

LESTER:
To transmit them, son, there is no other way. If you want to get there, you'll get there. The thing is that ideas don't get anywhere, projects do. When you have an idea, write it down, develop it. Don't leave an idea in your head, because there no one knows it exists. And things go on paper; things go to find equipment. People have to believe it, people don't believe in your idea, people are going to believe in your project. So, everyone who has an idea, a need, a fable to tell, some purpose, express it, write it down. In the last "Cafecito" we had, well not the last one, because we have more left, in the most recent "Cafecito" we had in Austin, someone asked me... someone asked me a question that I will repeat to you what I answered, which I think is valid for what you are asking me. Never miss the opportunity to write your right to freedom of expression, because there are many people—there are many countries—who don't even know that this is a right. You have it; you are aware of that. Create your work of freedom; say what you want to tell. If you want the world to be better, make it better. If you want the

world to be worse, that's up to you and your story, right? It will also have followers. But the other thing always speaks from the heart. If it doesn't hurt, it's not worth it. If it doesn't hurt... I look at my scenes, and I remember how many scenes I played out of pain, crying with the actors to bring them to emotion. It's not that I think what I'm doing is right. It's not me, it's how it works for me. There is a scene in *Casa vieja* where I remember that a shot was, was, was a shot of the mother and son in a conversation. We must speak from the heart. We must speak from the heart. And don't pay attention to the movies you watch, that's another important thing. Don't copy. Bet on yourself. Bet on you. And allow yourself all the time in the world to plan. I am one of the directors who does storyboarding. I do the staging, where each camera goes... Don't waste, while you have it, time to plan. Because that time is not wasted, it's what will allow you time on set to be with the actors, which, in short, is the most important thing. They are the face of your story. Any prior planning is fine.

CARLOS:

Any other questions? In the back...? We have little time left. Perhaps, one last question. Hum... The 10:00 AM scriptwriting course is mine, there is an attendance list, please sign.

Editing is More Than "Software"

STUDENT 4:

Well, basically my question is, as an aspiring video editor, and in the future, aspiring to do my own production, what would I recommend, where to get into, where to be, where I can grow, be a sponge, do you understand me?

LESTER:

I really don't know much about the options you would have in Puerto Rico... But what I can say to editors, to those who study editing, is that knowing software doesn't make you an editor. No, no, it's not that, no... As you know Final Cut or as you know Da Vinci, that doesn't make you an editor. Before, editing was done as if you were making shoes. Cutting, hitting with the *cosh*, and that's the beginning of cinema. Cinema is cut, cut and paste. Maybe being skillful with CapCut, with Final Cut, with any of the programs is good for a lot of things, especially for advertising. But for cinema, to tell a story, to have the pulse of how long the shot

should last, because I cut it here or there, and to read books on film-editing theory, which is very important. The thing is, I see a lot of tendencies in young people to cut, cut, cut, and you don't understand it, you don't understand dialogue. There are basic principles that the editor must determine. The line of sight, where do I look, where do I receive that look and where do I send it, how people communicate on the screen. That... And they're going to have that in the film-editing theory books. It's my obsession, that's what I studied. I was first an editor, and I love it. Every time a scholar comes: "No, because here you see the dissonance, and here a little star comes out." That doesn't matter. All of that is post-production, that's done when the film is already edited. To set up a film: time of the shot, intention of the sequence, and a feeling there that you have to have where to approach. Man, I don't know, because I wish I knew where to go to get closer to me too, and deliver resumes and stay and live on your island that I loved. If you find out, send me an email.