

Vanessa Lea (Archaeology & Anthropology) – Cuba, July 2012

In July 2012 I spent 4 weeks on an introduction to documentary filmmaking course in Cuba that I had applied for via the Latin American Department of UCL. Located one hour away from Havana, in the countryside town of San Antonio de Los Baños, EICTV (Escuela Internacional de Cine y Television) was founded by Gabriel Garcia Márquez in 1986 with the support of the Cuban government. Walking around the school one is reminded of the school's reputation around the world by reading messages left on the walls by Coppola, Spielberg, Scorsese, Lucas and other important filmmakers who have visited the institution.

The course was given by Enrique Colinas a Cuban filmmaker and academic who had presented a popular television program for 30 years in which films were analytically deconstructed for the general. We received classes at the school and in our teacher's home in Havana. We studied the history of documentary film, the dramatic principles underlying documentary narrative, the blurred edge between fiction and reality, the construction of characters, different sub-genres of documentary, and ethical conflicts in documentary praxis. We watched a variety of films starting from the very first documentary made, 'Nanook of the North' created from footage taken during anthropological research into the every day life of an Inuit family. Understanding the processes behind a such initiative, especially one filmed in the harsh environment of the Arctic, was particularly useful to me as I aim to explore media modules in my studies of Social Anthropology and hope to be able to compliment by dissertation with footage that I take during fieldwork next summer in the Amazon of Ecuador.

For the practical, we spent the afternoons in Old Havana completing various tasks from which we learnt the importance of being informed about social issues in order to find a good story, how to formulate and ask the correct sorts of questions and most importantly to recognise that the director must be aware of the fine line between fiction and reality when documenting all this. During my time there I learned about Afro-Caribbean religion from filming fortunetellers; in the famous 'China Town' I explored curious amalgamations of Cuban and Chinese cultural interests, and in small state-owned shops the people I interviewed explained the Cuban ration card system. I worked in a team of 3 consisting of a Canadian LGBT activist, and an American senior advertising executive. It was fascinating to learn the different ways they use film in their own fields of work as we collaborated our ideas to make our own amateur short films.

The course was an important introduction to documentary filmmaking for me as I am keen to apply my studies in cultural anthropology to film and hope to follow a career in documentary research and development. I am very grateful for the Pembroke Travel Grant scheme which enabled me to attend the course at EICTV which is a great place to meet a wide range of inspiring people in a setting so fascinating at this current point in history. I feel strongly that the skills in direction that I learnt as well as the basic technical skills I acquired became a strength in my resume as I applied online for a work experience internship at the BBC for 4 weeks at the end of the summer. I was successful and am currently working at the White City Media Centre on a documentary for BBC Factual London called 'Last Heroes of D-Day' and enjoying seeing much of what I learnt being put to practice in the work place.