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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v21.i0.2707>



**Frames Cinema Journal**

ISSN 2053-8812

Issue 21 (2023)

<http://www.framescinemajournal.com>



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**Jackson Jickson : exposed insularities in guerrilla filmmaking from ‘The Trinity Island’**

By Dr María Fernanda Miño Puga

“I don’t need to go to the cinema to see action” – Jackson Jickson (2023)

Filmmaker Jackson Jickson Quintero was originally born in San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas, a small coastal town in the north of Ecuador and considered to be one of the most impoverished districts in the country (Federación de Centros Chachis de Esmeraldas FECCHE et al. 2017). Like many livelihood-driven migrants in the late 1980s, his family eventually moved to Guayaquil -- Jickson was only three months old – the most densely populated city in Ecuador and host to the largest afro-descendent community to date (Navarrete 2019, Avilés Sánchez 2015). At the time, Guayaquil’s development plans included an ambitious highway project called Vía Perimetral, traversing the city and providing direct connections to Puerto Marítimo, the city (and country’s) main port. But even before construction began, irregular settlements or *invasiones* had already taken root alongside the expected highway. Persuaded by land traffickers, many families settled in these territories without proper access to electricity, drinking water or sewage systems. Jickson’s family was one of them, specifically moving to Isla Trinitaria, the last section of the highway.

Conditions were even more problematic in estuary regions like Isla Trinitaria. Being an island surrounded by three mangroves, its wetland geography was not conducive for complex developments and the few families that settled there did so in hut-like housing that ‘hindered’ contractors (Redacción Guayaquil 2010). Starting in 1987, the island was subject to a hydraulic filling process to strengthen its foundations and allow for the new Vía Perimetral to cross by. At this point, illegal settlements proved impossible to control. A few families turned into several hundred and then to a few thousand, reaching a population of

18,566 by 1990 (Morán 2019). Eventually, what began as an unplanned ‘hindrance’ became a full-fledged settlement, with families gradually securing property rights. Reaching more than 90,000 inhabitants in 2015, the island continued to experience high levels of land insecurity, poverty, and violence, in addition to waste pollution in the nearby mangroves (Ibid). It is under these conditions that Jickson produced two feature films, which he would sell at traffic lights and city buses alongside Vía Perimetral, almost thirty years after his arrival.

This article analyses the connections between Jickson’s filmmaking practice and Isla Trinitaria’s geographical, cultural, and ecological context. Parallels between the two are not limited to just inhabiting a sensible urban space, but can also be expanded to questions of value, the transit of goods and services, and the expected environmental aftermath of such developments. This article engages with with Axel Pérez Trujillo’s concept of ‘exposed insularity’ (2022), which analyses comparable case study related to islands, Jorge Furtado’s *Ilha das Flores* (Island of Flowers, 1989). By ‘exposed insularity’ Trujillo recognises that islands constitute a rather open and vulnerable geographic space, prone to capitalist trajectories of trade and consumerism, despite expectations of narrowness and self-containment. They identify these trajectories in *Ilha das Flores*, a non-fiction short film that criticises the literal island of waste that is located near the city of Porto Alegre, in the southeast coast of Brazil. While Trujillo analyses the relations between consumption and waste on Ilha das Flores (the island) in the eponymous film, this article suggests that ‘exposed insularity’ can also be applied to alternative film practices that emerge from similar precarious conditions, like in the case of Jackson Jickson and Isla Trinitaria.

This article first discusses an anecdotal account of Jickson’s film practices, situating them within the local film industry of Ecuador at the time. Described by some as a local ‘mini boom’ (Caselli 2012, De la Fuente 2015), Ecuadorian cinema experienced a significant

leap in quantity and quality between the mid-2000s and 2010s. In contrast, film expressions like Jickson's were usually framed as *Ecuador bajo tierra* or underground movement, distributed outside commercial theatres, and characterised by low production value and guerrilla aesthetics (Alvear and León, *Ecuador Bajo Tierra: videografías en circulación paralela*. 2009). This assumption of an 'unearthed' cinema in Jickson's filmography is further explored and attributed to global exchanges of cinematic taste and waste. Compared to preferred production practices that prioritised theatrical exhibition and critical acclaim, Jickson's films are usually seen as amateur, needing to be developed into a more palatable and professional aesthetic. Jickson himself would embrace this pursuit as he attempted to fund future projects, gain recognition as a filmmaker and consequently secure a livelihood (Quintero Boboy 2023). What makes Jickson's case particularly relevant to Trujillo's exposed insularity is its archipelagic marginality, open and exposed to capitalist trajectories even when such vulnerability proves detrimental for their welfare.

Consequently, this article continues with a review of Isla Trinitaria's social and environmental concerns, focusing on the period between 2012 and 2016. Here, the argument of exposed insularity becomes even more relevant. Not only was Jickson's main filmography produced then, but it also correlates with a "zero tolerance" campaign against illegal settlements supported by the state (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador 2013). This campaign eventually resulted in tragic forceful evictions, with sectors like Isla Trinitaria experiencing evident human rights violations despite being an already established settlement (Navarrete, *Informe Sobre Desalojos Forzosos Isla Trinitaria* 2015). Therefore, in addition to the ecological impact of the initial settlements, the human debris of these evictions attest for Isla Trinitaria's increased vulnerability, affecting the mangrove as well as the physical wellbeing of its inhabitants.

This article intended to close with a textual analysis of two of Jickson's films: his opera prima *Dime Hasta Cuándo* (2012) and his sophomore feature *Una Noche Sin Sueño* (2016). As of July 2023, these films are expected to be re-edited and re-released via online platforms. However, since these films are not yet available, the textual analysis presented focuses on previews of these films available online.<sup>1</sup> Here, I argued that Jickson's body of work is able to capture the social and ecological tensions of Isla Trinitaria, even when not necessarily conceived with an environmental critique in mind. In doing so, Jickson's filmography reveals the exposed insularity that permeates Isla Trinitaria, given its unique positioning as an urban island adjacent to the city of Guayaquil. This argument is further corroborated by analysing a video report by a local NGO, the Standing Committee for the Defence of Human Rights or CDH, that also showcases similar aesthetic techniques as Jickson's films and further validating its witnessing potential.

#### Exposed Insularity, Poetics of Relations, and Trans-Corporeality

To explore the multiple connections between Jickson's film practice and Isla Trinitaria's ecological concerns, an interdisciplinary approach is indeed required. In this sense, Trujillo's concept of exposed insularity provides some helpful insights to theorise these problematics, given Isla Trinitaria's unique positioning as an urban island in the Gulf of Guayaquil. Pérez Trujillo relies on two main sources in developing this framework: the 'poetics of Relation' by Édouard Glissant (1997) and the concept of 'trans-corporeality' by Stacy Alaimo (2016).

From these two inputs, Trujillo concludes that "an exposed insularity critically traces the dark

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<sup>1</sup> The unavailability of these films, despite their remembrance and impact in local culture, speak of their ephemeral condition. Paul Grainge describes the ephemeral as connoting "the evanescent, transient and brief... anything short-lived" (2017, 1). This connotation also carries applications related to the peripheral, throwaway, and to questions of cultural value (Ibid), which directly relates to the positioning of Jickson's films. As a personal anecdote, unable to retrieve the DVDs of the films which I had previously acquired through street vendors, I reached out to Mr Jickson, who coincidentally was in the process of re-editing them. In this sense, the initial films can be said to be irretrievable in their original form.

side of interconnections in the Anthropocene, revealing the often-ignored exchanges between bodily natures that come to the surface in island geographies” (2022, 137). In this line, this article seeks to explore the economic, societal, and environmental trajectories that converge at Isla Trinitaria and that are present in the film texts of Jackson Jickson.

Like the analysis of Furtado’s *Ilha das Flores* that prompted the concept of exposed insularity the exchanges that take place in Isla Trinitaria can be attributed to its geographical positioning in relation to Guayaquil, but also at a more granular level when assessing the bodily relations between humans and with non-human entities. Here, theories by Glissant and Alaimo overlap and complement each other. Starting with the former and referring specifically to the Caribbean, Glissant understands the archipelago as ‘each island embody[ing] openness’ (1989, 139 in Trujillo 2022). While a Martinique-born philosopher and poet with early ties to the negritude movement of Aimé Césaire, Glissant rejects the idea of islands as self-contained and isolated geographies (Mortimer 1992). Rather, Glissant sees islands as spaces of relation that oppose the constraints established by continents, which in the case of the Caribbean are closely linked to colonisation and its resulting ‘creolisation’ (1997). Pérez Trujillo draws from Glissant to conclude that the islands featured in Furtado’s film are open in a negative and positive sense: prone to the waste disposal that results from the global circulation of commodities but also porous to intercultural exchanges (2022, 137). In this regard, Glissant’s motto reads quite suitable: “I can change through exchanging with others, without losing or diluting my sense of self” (Glissant and Ulrich Obrist 2022).

Insularity, therefore, acknowledges the concrete identity of islands but avoids imposing a narrative of self-containment and narrowness. As this article seeks to discuss, places like Isla Trinitaria can be expected to develop a concrete sense of self that is also malleable, shaped by the persistent flow of people, goods, and services. Specifically, this identity is formed by the low-income internal migrants that populated the island,

infrastructural developments like Vía Perimetral aimed at boosting international trade, and the production of afro-Ecuadorian cultural products like Jickson's films. But as the opening example of this article suggests, this malleability is also risky. Related to Ilha das Flores, Trujillo combines the idea of insularity with Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporality, in particular its embedded exposure (2016). By trans-corporality, Alaimo highlights substantial material exchanges that trespass an assumed divide between humans and their environment, or what they describe as 'figure/ground relations' (2018, 435). The notion of 'exposure' comes into play as these transversal dynamics suppose an inherent risk, especially when discussing the toxicity of waste evident in Ilha das Flores, the island, later hypertextualized in *Ilha das Flores*, the film. Pérez Trujillo interprets this toxicity considering Alaimo's trans-corporality of toxic bodies, both human and non-human, which implies a shared vulnerability based on the precarious (2022, 139). For the case of Isla Trinitaria, trans-corporality can be observed in the ecological debris of irregular settlements and forced evictions, in addition to the immediate toxicity of its precariousness, in the form of organised crime, violence and substance abuse. These themes also resonate with Jickson's preferred narratives.

To further assess the concept of 'exposed insularity' for Jackson Jickson and Isla Trinitaria, each of their trajectories are mapped before evaluating how these intersect in Jickson's film texts. As expected, Jickson is usually characterised as an underground / guerrilla filmmaker yet to find recognition within an Ecuadorian field of cultural production. Likewise, Isla Trinitaria remains an urban slum that continues to struggle with irregular settlements, more recently exacerbated by a "zero tolerance" campaign and so-called environmental initiatives like Guayaquil Ecológico (Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano y Vivienda, Ministerio del Ambiente 2013). Therefore, this article continues by exploring the specific film industry articulations during Jickson's production practice, which demonstrate a

clear divide between the local cinema consumed in commercial theatres, and a *bajo tierra* movement that circulates outside traditional exhibition sites.

Jackson Jickson and *La Platota Musical*

In feature piece for *Revista Mundo Diners*, journalist Elías Urdánigo (2013) provides a detailed account of Jickson's cultural interests and practices. The title of the piece, *La Perla Negra* (The Black Pearl), already hints to connections between the city and its Afro-Ecuadorian influences. Often referred to as *La Perla del Pacífico* (The Pacific Pearl), Guayaquil hosts the largest Afro-Ecuadorian population in the country, even larger than Esmeraldas, the northern-most province in Ecuador and known for its Afro-Ecuadorian roots. Born in Esmeraldas, it is not surprising to see Jickson's family choosing to settle in Isla Trinitaria, the sector in Guayaquil that concentrates a large percentage of this population. The title of Urdánigo's piece suggests the dichotomy between the aspired glossiness of the city and the opacity of its predominantly black population.<sup>2</sup>

The piece opens with Jickson at the crossroads of a busy street in Guayaquil. Jickson leads a group of boys (or *los muchachos* as described by the article) selling DVDs of Jickson's first feature film *Dime hasta cuando* (Figure 1), with the intention of raising funds for his following project *Una noche sin sueño* (2016). While the first film had allegedly sold over 10,000 copies through street vendors, Jickson would not see much of these earnings. Averaging one dollar per copy, this expected income would soon be spent in transportation, equipment rentals that consist primarily of a Canon prosumer camera, as well as refreshments for the boys (Urdánigo 2013). In some instances, DVDs would be sold without Jickson's

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<sup>2</sup> One of Jickson's shooting locations in Isla Trinitaria is Cooperativa Independencia 2, commonly known as 'Nigeria'. According to Urdánigo (2013), the nickname gained popularity in 2002, when residents chose to wear the Nigerian jersey during a local football tournament. This anecdote further illustrates the racial makeup of the island as well how the population of the island identifies itself.



knowledge to fulfil the immediate needs of these boys. This vignette closely resembles hand to mouth conditions that permeate Jickson's film production and Isla Trinitaria more broadly. Indeed, Urdánigo also mentions that as a teenager, Jickson would sell sweets in interprovincial buses, work as an errand boy or help in construction sites, among many other forms of underemployment (Ibid). Hence, it is not surprising to see Jickson and *los muchachos* engaging in a similar business model to promote these films, one that is all too familiar given their social positioning.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: DVD Cover of *Dime Hasta Cuando* (2016), Jackson Jickson's first film (Yépez 2016)

Under these circumstances, it is worth asking how someone like Jickson would manage to produce a film in the first place. In an interview for this article (Quintero Boboy 2023), Jickson stated that film production grew organically from early ventures in music management, still constituting one of his main creative outputs. During the late 2000s and

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<sup>3</sup> Urdánigo emphasis on *los muchachos* finds resonance in a viral video circulated by Triniuerto resident Jessica Alarcón, commonly known as 'Mafia Chumi' (2015). Recorded on a mobile phone, the video features Alarcón smoking a marihuana joint and greeting her fellow *muchachos* down the street. After serving time in jail for alleged possession of drugs, Alarcón still aspires to become a television reporter (Párraga 2021)

despite underemployment, Jickson met an undisclosed investor that awarded an unspecified amount of money to develop this interest. At the time, Jickson worked as a storehouse clerk for a local telecommunications company, but still found space to produce music with some local performers, with a preference of tropical genres such as salsa and urban music.

Jickson's opera prima *Dime hasta cuando* came about as a by-product of an intended music video, after realising that the footage was extensive enough to be turned into a feature film.

The name of Jickson's music label *La Platota Musical* (Big Money Music) is a direct reference to this event, also related to the "big pockets full of change" that they would carry after a full day of selling their work on street buses (Ibid).

#### The *Ecuador Bajo Tierra* movement

Film scholar Lúcia Ramos Monteiro (2016) refers to a phrase that captures the essence of what came to be known as *Ecuador bajo tierra* movement, which also relates to Jickson's film practices described above: *Filmo, luego existo* (I film; therefore, I am). The phrase was initially featured in the film *Mas allá del Mall* (Beyond the Mall, 2010) a local mockumentary that uses a colloquial tone to showcase the inner workings of underground filmmakers in Ecuador. Onscreen, the phrase was articulated by underground filmmaker Nelson Palacios, although it was originally written by director Miguel Alvear to summarise the production practices and social struggles of the movement. The phrase denotes a sense of urgency in film production to secure a livelihood, relying on alternative business models that operate outside the multiplex and depend on self-distribution and self-promotion. Jickson film practice shows many of these characteristics, however, what makes it distinctive from other underground expressions is their unique racial and ecological positioning in relation to Isla Trinitaria. It is this particularity that also connects with Trujillo's exposed insularity,

situating Jickson's underground production at the margins of global capitalist trajectories of taste and waste.

Indeed, scholars that have studied *Ecuador Bajo Tierra* films (hereby EBT) tend to use terminology that implies a low-brow characterisation, which aligns with the movement's relative position within a local field of cultural production. The *Ecuador Bajo Tierra* label, for instance, refers to the idea of operating "beneath the dominant culture" which characterised American underground film but does not go as far as enjoying a fashionable tastemaker status among intellectual elites (O'Pray 2006, 63). Rather, Alvear and film scholar Christian León accurately situate EBT films in "parallel circulation" to expected trajectories of local film production that see theatrical distribution as a marker of success (2009). Film scholar Gabriela Alemán (2009) draws a similar conclusion, describing EBT films as distinct from the Ecuadorian cinema that is shown in theatres, targeted to the urban middle class and cultured elites. Yet Alemán avoids offering a definitive exploitation categorisation, given that EBT films do not necessarily tackle forbidden or morally compromising themes, although coinciding with low-budget production and independent distribution (Schaefer 2007, Hunter 2013). More recently, Carolina Stinisky (2018) approaches EBT films from the perspective of precariousness and hints to a 'lesser' cinema, or 'less than' the cinemas of small nations theorised by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (2007). Similar counterparts include Peru's *Cine Regional* (Bustamante and Luna-Victoria 2014), Colombia's *Cines Populares* (González Valencia 2020), and Nigeria's Nollywood (Haynes 2016).

In short, this body of research seems to define EBT films in relation to dominant film practices, both locally and globally. However, scholar Rafael Ponce-Cordero also suggests that such phenomenon can be self-inflicted, what they describe as "neoliberalism from below" (2019). Referring to the local *bajo tierra* movement, Ponce-Cordero identifies an

internal need for recognition that is grounded in an understanding of success equated to profitability. In other words, underground filmmakers seem to aspire to commercial exhibition, high production value and the expected profit gained from developing their craft, which are aspirations not solely imposed from the top. As Ponce-Cordero would argue, underground filmmakers are aware of their marginal standing and embrace a narrative of progress as a means to find validation in the local film industry. In this line, filmmakers like Jickson present themselves as self-made entrepreneur or *todoólogos* (jack of all trades), able to adapt to as many demands a project can bring, in the hopes of eventually reaching financial security.

The fact that many of these filmmakers remain at the margins despite their innate talent, desire and work ethic suggests structural barriers that prevent them to be fully acknowledged within a local film industry. Whereas an “objective incompetence” can be observed regarding formal elements such as unpolished camera work, non-professional actors, over-the-top dialogue and unconstructed set design and locales, their marginality is not a matter of film training but a reflection of broader societal issues.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on Fernando Cedeño’s *Sicarios Manabitas* (Hitmen from Manabi, 2004), Stinisky describes EBT films as “the precarious other” (2018, 187), showcasing their otherness through locales outside city centres but also through the creative ways in which they choose to produce and distribute their films. Like with many “lesser than” cinemas from Peru, Colombia and Nigeria, films like *Sicarios Manabitas* “are considerably indebted to the action films of the Van Damme-Stallone-Segal trinity; as well as to the Mexican *narcofronteriza* (border/drug) film.” (Alemán 2009, 268). In this sense, EBT films aspire to a global aesthetic defined by international tastemakers, but by failing to reach a high-production value or reasonable

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<sup>4</sup> On the relation between badness in film and incompetence, see Bartlett (2019)

technical expertise, which León describes as an “imitation of an impossible model” (Alvear and León 2009, 22), they inadvertently become somewhat of a local parody. For the case of Jackson Jickson, “the precarious other” directly relates to his vulnerability as an Afro-Ecuadorian filmmaker from Isla Trinitaria, also prone to these transnational influences.

Therefore, as underground filmmakers have internalised expectations of value and worth attributed to global film markets, they continue to inhabit what Gabriela Alemán describes as “the liminal space where globalization equals economic inequity” (Aleman 2009 272). Yet, it is in this ‘badness’ that a sense of subversion begins to take place, making use of illegal circuits of distribution to cater to a demand that arguably exceeds traditional viewership in theatres (Ibid).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, as Robert Stam would conclude for “garbage” more broadly, the dismissed and overlooked *Ecuador bajo tierra* movement has no option but to “reveal the social formation as seen "from below" (1998, 24), even when these filmmakers aspired to the same value systems that impose hegemonic control.

#### Isla Trinitaria and ‘Aesthetics of Garbage’

Applying an allegory of garbage to describe the *Ecuador bajo tierra* and by extension Jickson’s filmmaking practice can certainly be problematic. Even the *bajo tierra* terminology has come into scrutiny by many underground filmmakers who would rather use a guerrilla moniker (Alvear and León 2009), Jickson included (Quintero Boboy 2023). Scholars like Ramos Monteiro (2016) would propose terms like *autodidacta* or self-taught to move away from the negative connotations of the *bajo tierra*, including its unearthed and clandestine assumptions. While these suggestions are undoubtedly valid, I believe that such

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<sup>5</sup> Alemán, for instance, refers to illegal distribution avenues such as piracy as a means to overcome coloniality (2009, 263). Analysing the politics of copyright and drawing on the work on Rocío Silva Santistevan (Silva Santisteban 2007), Alemán defends the use of photocopies to make available otherwise inaccessible film education and resources. This line of reasoning would serve to further support her argument against giving a definitive latsploitation label to EBT films.

concerns should also be explored in relation to Isla Trinitaria's history of ecological damage, human displacement, and poverty, which also inform Jickson's film texts. These trajectories will reveal that, like the *Ecuador bajo tierra* movement, Isla Trinitaria also carries an assumed expectation of a lesser standing, even to the point of being at times being considered disposable.

Expanding on the development of Isla Trinitaria as an urban slum, it is worth mentioning the role of land traffickers in promoting irregular settlements in the sector. According to Billy Navarrete who serves as director of the Standing Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDH), land traffickers enjoyed a semi-tacit agreement with local authorities during the 1970s and 80s, which allowed them to promise land security and stability to incoming internal migrants (Entrevista Billy Navarrete - Isla Trinitaria | #Sobrevivientes PlanV 2019). Operating at the border of illegality, land traffickers would facilitate construction materials to build houses, even without proper sewage systems or access to drinking water. They would also mobilise local groups to 'protect' the slums, closely resembling guerrilla forces to counter expropriation efforts by the local police (Ibid). In short, land traffickers played a two-fold role when negotiating property rights: capitalising on the needs of the collective but also using that collective force to secure political leverage. Not surprisingly, many of these traffickers remained in the public sphere even after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, maintaining important levels of popularity among low-income voters.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sebastián Cordero's film *Sin Muertos No Hay Carnaval* (Such is Life in the Tropics, 2016) portrays some of these dynamics for an unspecified urban slum in the city of Guayaquil. The film was Ecuador's official entry for the Academy Awards.

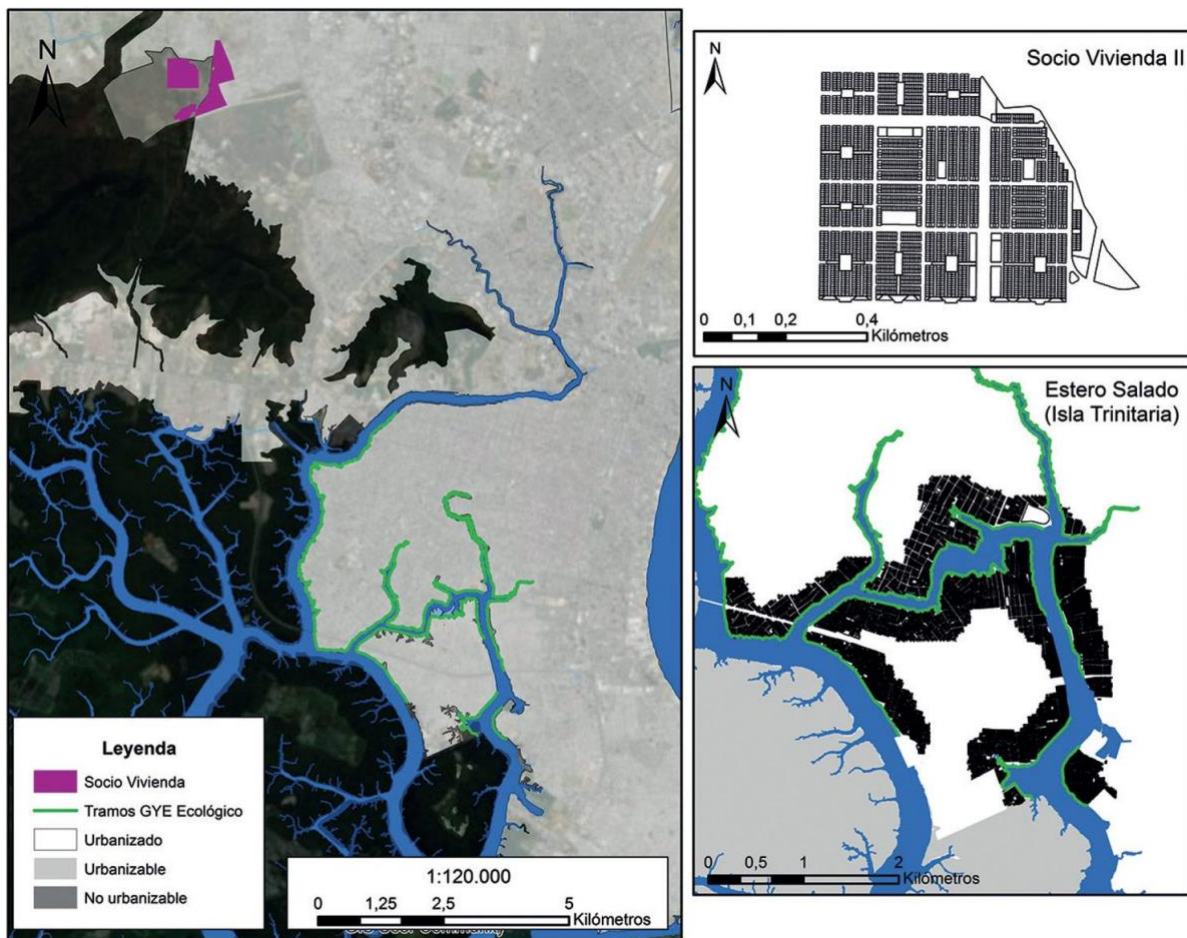


Figure 2: Chart of Guayaquil (Bonilla Mena, et al. 2021), highlighting the Guayaquil Ecológico programme surrounding Isla Trinitaria (in green) and the housing development Socio Vivienda II (in purple), where Trinitaria residents were intended to be relocated to.

Without an appropriate urban layout and controlled primarily by land traffickers, Isla Trinitaria experienced an aggressive destruction of the local mangrove. Starting with the hydraulic filling that consolidated the island, urban waste increased as more families began to populate the area, equally affecting the surrounding estuary regions. The precarity of these settlements also prompted high levels of violence and organised crime, in addition to heavy consumption and commercialisation of narcotics (García 2016, Naranjo 2016, Torres 2023). By 2012, when Jackson Jickson produced his first feature film, the only few pockets of native vegetation left were located on the northeast side of the island, specifically near Cooperativa Mélida de Toral, one of Jickson's shooting locations (García, Un cine crudo y popular surge

de la Trinitaria 2015). While northwards the estuary serves as a natural delimiter for the island, its southern border consists primarily of small scale or privately owned trading ports, visibly constituting a wall of cement that prevents further settlements (Figure 2). A similar dynamic can be observed alongside the shoreline of the island, where many families were been evicted to build so-called *Parques Lineales* or linear parks, also featuring cement-based constructions. Adding to the already mentioned Vía Perimetral that traverses the island, as Susana Morán would state in a journalistic piece for Plan V, “cement is synonymous with legalisation” in *Isla Trinitaria* (2019).



Figure 3: Photo record by CDH Guayaquil (2015), published only days before the tragic evictions took place on March 2015

Expanding on these evictions, nearly forty families situated near Cooperativa Mérida de Toral were forcefully expropriated from their homes (Navarrete, Informe Sobre Desalojos Forzosos Isla Trinitaria 2015). This incident occurred on March 27, 2015. Without proper notice and due diligence, four hundred armed policemen intervened the area, employing backhoe loaders



to destroy these houses, many constructed with the local *caña guadua* and other vulnerable mixed materials. From an ecological perspective and in line with the Guayaquil Ecológico programme, this decision was justified by the apparent environmental risk involved by irregular settlements, since many of these houses were built at the shore of the estuary (Mendoza Reynoso 2015). However, only four years later, the lineal parks that replaced these households were considered “useless” and instead foster illegal activities such as thefts and drug use (Morán 2019). In this line, considering Mary Douglas understanding of garbage as “matter out of place” (Douglas 2002), Isla Trinitaria continues to appear as an unfortunate ‘hindrance’, just as it did at the time of its hydraulic filling.

#### Guerrilla filmmaking from ‘The Trinity Island’

Certainly, the convergence of internal livelihood-driven migration, the scarcity of low-income housing, and insufficient strategies promoted by land traffickers, city, and state governments, have resulted in a significant environmental toll for Isla Trinitaria and its inhabitants. This, compared to the marginality experienced by Jickson as a *bajo tierra* filmmaker that also aspires to traditional expectations of success based on profitability and commercial exhibition, have equally resulted in film texts that showcase an obvious transnational aspiration but cannot negate their immediate vulnerability. Therefore, the following section analyses excerpts from two of Jickson’s films: his opera prima *Dime hasta cuando* (2012) and his sophomore feature *Una noche sin sueño* (2016). These films are later compared to a video report by the CDH on the mentioned evictions, arguing that both examples showcase exposed insularity as theorised by Pérez Trujillo.

As stated before, unless acquired through street vendors on Vía Perimetral or similar urban intersections, Jickson’s films are not readily available. According to Jickson (2023),

his films were not shared online due to their sensible content, only uploading few excerpts for advertisement purposes on YouTube. This decision might also be attributed to preventing piracy; however, the films continue to be requested, particularly by former Isla Trinitaria's residents. Jickson states that there is an interest in recalling the landscape of the island prior to the Guayaquil Ecológico programme and similar city-wide beautification project promoted by the city council. The fact that Jickson's films were produced around this period already hints to some potential parallels between these events, but also highlights their importance in terms of Isla Trinitaria's own social memory.

Some obvious aesthetic coincidences can already be observed between the excerpts available from the films and the footage collected in the aftermath of these forceful evictions, each demonstrating their own sense of exposed insularity. Narratively speaking, Jickson's first film *Dime hasta cuando* tells the story of mafia groups fighting for territory in the island, also featuring love triangles and other non-related subplots that complement the film. One preview available online (*Dime Hasta Cuando - La Pelicula*, Avances 2012) starts with the title "The Trinity Island" on black, accompanied by eerie music that increases in intensity as the first scenes appear. A handheld wide shot reveals a group of Afro-Ecuadorian teenage boys dressed in rugged sportswear, running through a paved intersection as they discover another boy lying dead on the pavement, covered in blood and construction materials. The remainder of the preview consists of more criminal activity, such as pickpocketing or robbing a storefront while holding heavy guns. A brief interlude features a vulnerable Jickson excusing his behaviour to a concerned partner.

The nature of Jickson's filmmaking explains its unstable camera work, running behind characters to follow action scenes, or experimenting with zoom settings to heighten

emotionally charged conversations. The mobility of prosumer equipment also led to continuity errors between cuts, unbalanced blocking and out of focus compositions. But it is this lack of artifice in Jickson's films that further witnesses the conditions of its production practices. For instance, while the opening scene of the preview is shot on a concrete road, the surrounding houses show mixed materials and walls without plaster. Other passages feature unpaved roads covered in mud and overgrown vegetation, with houses built from *caña guada*, a local material that resembles bamboo cane. The final scene includes construction waste stacked on the side of a dusty road and zinc plates that serve as improvised property fences for the *caña* households (Figure 4). Hence, as Morán would later explain (2019), cement constitutes a clear divide in Isla Trinitaria, a staple of the progress narrative promulgated by city and state officials, at the expense of vulnerable residents and the local mangrove.



Figure 4: Still from Jickson's first film *Dime Hasta Cuando* (2012)

This exposed insularity is not limited to the landscape of Isla Trinitaria but can also be extended to its effect on Afro-Ecuadorian bodies, in the form of organised crime, violence and substance abuse. Jickson's second film *Una noche sin sueño* (2016) stars Jickson as a successful business owner that loses everything after developing a drug addiction. The film

trailer (Película una noche sin sueño con la participación de la artista maesa 2015) opens with a silhouette of an Afro-Ecuadorian woman lighting what appears to be a marihuana cigarette, outdoors and late into the night. Her face is out of focus, whereas the overgrown vegetation in the background appears dimly lit and in focus. The trailer follows with a super-cut montage of the woman seeking more drugs, a group of gang members on motorcycles and carrying guns, and clips of Jickson falling into insanity, waking up in the middle of an abandoned field. Like in the previous excerpt, Jickson's character is also confronted by his partner, who asks for an explanation as their house and other properties are about to be embargoed.



Figure 5: Still from Jickson's second film *Una Noche Sin Sueño* (2016)

In terms of aesthetic choices, the unstable camera work, unpolished continuity, and use of non-professional actors are also maintained in *Una noche sin sueño*. However, Jickson seems to bring an additional layer of meaning by employing the landscape of Isla Trinitaria as an allegoric signifier. To illustrate, the opening scene of the trailer also shows the addicted woman scavenging through the dirt, looking for coins to acquire more drugs. The drug house

that she visits is made of *caña guadua*, whilst the inside of Jickson's house displays another type of wooden material: carefully carved sculptures to represent their lavished lifestyle.

Lastly, a more obvious connection can be observed in the abandoned field scene. Shot from a low-angle perspective, two thirds of the frame are composed by construction debris: a mesh of rocks, wood, metal rods and landfill waste. Behind the mesh, Jickson hunches, out of focus, to caress one of the few plants that remain in the field. An unplastered wall serves as a backdrop while Jickson tries to make sense of his surroundings. Almost unintentionally, the porosity of black bodies inhabiting a precarious islandic space appears to be portrayed in this human/ground encounter (Figure 5).

Interestingly, while Jickson's films constitute fictional portrayals of this exposed insularity, they resonate with related works of non-fiction, in particular a video report by the Standing Committee for the Defence of Human Rights recorded only a few hours after the tragic evictions took place on March 2015 (CDH Guayaquil 2015). The video, uploaded on YouTube the day after these evictions, opens with a group of young people gathered in front of the camera. Outdoors and late in the evening, the group appears lit by a singular beam of light. With a black and white colour correction, they are prompted by a question off screen: "Is this the first time that you have had to sleep on the streets?", to which they respond altogether: "Yes, for all of us" (Ibid). Subsequently, the camera walks around the rubble left by the backhoe loaders, featuring children sleeping on top of the debris, covered in blankets. The camera is guided by worried residents, particularly mothers who express their anxiety on the situation. The minute-long video closes with a tilt-down shot of two afro-Ecuadorian children attempting to sleep outdoors.

Compared to sensational television reporting or local sitcoms that portray Isla Trinitaria, the CDH report features many of the aesthetic choices of Jickson's films, which

gives validity to their witnessing potential.<sup>7</sup> The unsteady camera work is justified and even anticipated, given the urgency of events and the stylistic expectations of a journalist report. The video piece also displays the same housing constructions as Jickson's films, predominantly built from *caña guadua* or zinc plates that function as walls. Like the depiction of waste and construction material, these decisions can be attributed to Jickson's inability to modify its environment when scouting locations, however, the fact that he chooses to portray such locales despite their reputation as irregular settlements, suggest that they constitute an intrinsic component of Isla Trinitaria's identity.



Figure 6: *¿Plan de Contingencia o Indigencia?* (Contingency or Indigence Plan? 2015). Video report by CDH Guayaquil on Isla Trinitaria's evictions.

This article has contended that Jackson Jickson's own filmmaking practice, as well as Isla Trinitaria islandic geography, display exposed insularity as theorised by Axel Pérez

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<sup>7</sup> On this note, two specific examples can be mentioned: *En Carne Propia* (In True Blood, 2008-2021) a news programme characterised by sensationalist stories aimed at low-income households, and *La Trinity* (2016-2017) a local sitcom that uses Isla Trinitaria as its main locale. According to Jickson (2023), this latter example was directly inspired by him.

Trujillo, given their unique geographical, cultural, and ecological positioning. This argument has been supported by mapping the capitalist trajectories of trade and waste evident in Jackson's body of work as a *bajo tierra* filmmaker, and Isla Trinitaria's long history of ecological damage, human displacement, and precariousness. At a more specific level, this exposed insularity has been analysed in the film text of Jackson Jackson, resorting to few excerpts and previews available online. These have also been compared to a video report by the local Standing Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, constituting an important record of forced evictions and human rights violations in Isla Trinitaria, which take a higher resonance when considering the predominantly Afro-Ecuadorian makeup of the island. In both instances, Isla Trinitaria is portrayed as an open and vulnerable archipelagic space, prone to the debris of global exchanges of goods and services and the resulting exposed trans-corporality between human and non-human agents. As Rob Nixon states: "Casualties of slow violence—human and environmental—are the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted." (2011, 11). In this sense, despite their technical shortcomings, Jackson Jackson's films can potentially become a vehicle for these casualties to be seen, either by Isla Trinitaria's inhabitants and residents directly affected by the illegal expropriations, or even those that, like CDH Guayaquil, can end up also seeing themselves taking action against the mesh of global trajectories of waste.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As previously stated, the two films mentioned in this article are currently being re-edited, expected to be uploaded to social media soon. Jackson is currently working on a new project called *Negro Mío* (My Negro 2023) which he intends to turn into a Netflix Original Series (Quintero Boboy 2023).



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## **Biography**

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