

## CUBAN CINEMA AFTER 50 YEARS

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*Juventud rebelde*

Even though the Lumière brothers' invention had arrived on the island a half century before the triumph of the Revolution, Cuba did not enjoy, in terms of cinema, a golden age like the one Mexican film saw in the decade of the 1940's. It is curious that the cinématographe arrived in Mexico only a few months before coming to Cuba; it came by the same hand, that of Gabriel Veyre, who would begin our film history, in Havana, with the documentary film *Simulacro de incendio* (*Image of a Fire*).

Titles of Cuban films from those early years were a mix of simple comedy, melodramatic plots of little import, and cartoon characters in quaint manners play, which highlighted the sassy mulata, the counterpoint between Spaniard and black, and which affirmed the gallantry of the offspring of rich families. Film was simply an echo of popular theater and of popular radio shows, placed on the big screen; and a film never would achieve the resonance which the premiere of a radio show would.

Not to be ignored is the pioneering work of Enrique Díaz Quesada, auteur of the film *El rey de los campos de Cuba* (*The King of the Cuban Fields*, 1913); or that of Ramón Peón, who made *La virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (*The Virgin of Charity*, 1930) – considered one of the best films on the continent of that period; or that of his disciple Ernesto Caparrós, who filmed *La serpiente roja* (*The Red Serpent*, 1932) – a version of the work by the same name from Félix B. Caignet-; and that of the magnate Manolo Alonso, who was the director of films such as *Casta de roble* (*Oak Caste*, 1953).

But, of course, it is inevitably necessary to accentuate a "before and an after" with respect to the founding of the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficas (ICAIC), the first cultural organ created by the revolutionary government on March 24,

1959.

Already, with impetus from the Cultural Division of the Revolutionary Army, two documentaries had been made: *Esta tierra nuestra* (*This Our Land*, 1959) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea; and *La vivienda* (*Housing*, 1959), by Julio García-Espinosa. The first, which dealt with the dispossession of the rural workers, coincided with the passage of Agrarian Reform Law, while the second was a testimony to the process of the nationalization of housing.

As a precedent, during the last years of tyranny, there was the making of the documentary *El Mégano* (*The Dune*, 1955), directed by Julio García-Espinosa, whose showing on the grounds of the University of Havana earned the director and his collaborators persecution from the Batista hordes.

### **The right to be reborn**

With the ICAIC Cuban cinema set out on a search for a new birth, and it achieved it: the Golden Decade finally erupted with its own aesthetic, along with a thematics which grew from the nation's cultural identity

The new films, of course, were the fruit of a generation of different auteurs, many of them coming from the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo (the Cultural Association of Our Times), like Alfredo Guevara, Jorge Haydú, José Massip, García-Espinosa, and the Titan himself (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea).

From the very beginning, celluloid tasted of Revolution. The desire to tell history served for the telling of the times of recent events with a documentary-like bent; it served as well for the retelling of past feats, from the mythical deeds wrought by the mambises to the –still warm– conquests of the bearded heroes.

As if it were a *sui géneris* textbook, opened were the pages of *Historias de la Revolución* (*Stories of the Revolution*, 1960), by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea; followed on quickly by the reversal of fortunes of *El joven rebelde* (*The Young Rebel*, 1961), by Julio García-Espinosa; reaching their climax in *Lucía*, by Humberto Solás, and in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*), also by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, the Titan, both from 1968.



*El brigadista* (*The Teacher*, 1977) and *Guardafronteras*, (*Border Guards*, 1980) by Octavio Cortázar; just like *Caravana* (*Caravan*, 1992), by Rogelio París, would give later treatment to the events with which the Cuban Revolution would continue to carve out the Island's destiny; while all the time offering up storylines for new cinematographic scripts: the Literacy Campaign, the defense of the nation's sovereign territory, and the internationalism of the war in Angola.

Although this historicist thematics periodically did not show any signs of coming to an end, with the presence of emblematic films like *La primera carga al machete* (*The First Charge of the Machete*, 1969), by Manuel Octavio Gómez, Cuban cinema showed a capacity to integrate itself into a social and critical work ethic as the one postulated in Law 169, which gave it life: to become the

«instrumento de opinión y formación de la conciencia individual y colectiva», as well as to «contribuir a hacer más profundo y diáfano el espíritu revolucionario y a sostener su aliento creador».<sup>1</sup>

From a satirical point of view, *Las doce sillas* (*Twelve Chairs*, 1962), *La muerte de un burócrata* (*Death of a Bureaucrat*, 1966) and *Los sobrevivientes* (*The Survivors*, 1979), all by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, assailed against the stigma of a decadent bourgeoisie and the absurdities of the bureaucratic establishment.

Neither were there lacking those films which approached contemporary society in a more direct and confrontational way, like *Un día de noviembre* (*A Day in November*, 1972), by Humberto Solás; *Retrato de Teresa* (*Portrait of Teresa*, 1979), by Pastor Vega,



<sup>1</sup> "instrument of opinion and the formation of individual and collective consciousness" as well as "to contribute to the forging of the deepest and most diaphanous revolutionary spirit and to sustaining its creative force".

*De cierta manera* (*One Way or Another*, 1974), by Sara Gómez, *Plaff o demasiado miedo a la vida* (*Plaff o Too Much Fear of Life*, 1988), by Juan Carlos Tabío, and *Papeles Secundarios* (*Secondary Roles*, 1989), by Orlando Rojas.

### **Adorable truths**

But, what is further true is that Cuban film, under the influence of a cultural politics moved by the revolutionary spirit, went in the direction of human rather than commercial values, because of which many of the scripts were written on basis of very Cuban literary works which did not so easily transition to film as those theatrical and radio pieces of old.

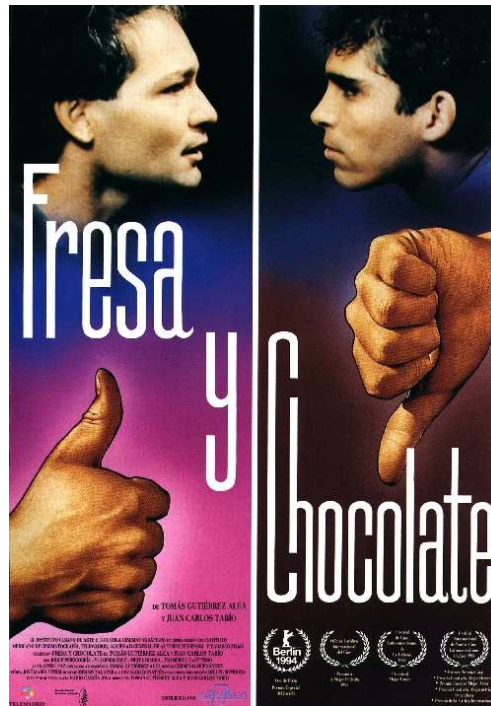
*Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* (*A Cuban Fight Against Demons*, 1972), *Cecilia* (1981), *El otro Francisco* (*The Other Francisco*, 1975), *Juan Quinquín* (1967), *Amada* (*Beloved*, 1983), and *El siglo de las luces* (*The Century of Light*, 1993), are examples of this; an treat that has only continued to enrich film to this day, with the assimilation of contemporary literary figures likes Miguel Barnet (*La Bella del Alhambra* [*The Beauty of the Alhambra*], 1989), Mirta Yáñez (*Madagascar*, 1994), Senel Paz (*Fresa y Chocolate* [*Strawberry and Chocolate*], 1994) and Arturo Arango (*Lista de espera* [*Waiting List*], 2000).

The arrival of the 1990's, with the weight of the special period and the void left by the fall of the socialist camp, brought with it an economic restructuring, which found in co-productions and digital technology good allies in the continued making of films Cuba.

In the face of crisis, films preferred not to bury their heads in the sand of historical thematics or other artifices of evasion; but rather, once again, they have known how to be vocal witness to current realities.

One time it is drama and another it is the slow pace of comedy, but we have now and forever the memories of *Reina y Rey* [*Queen and King*], 1994), the way of sorrows of *Guantanamera* (1995), the introspective scenes of *Madagascar* and *La vida es silbar* (*Life is to Whistle*, 1998), the infinite sensitivity of *Suite Habana* (*Havana Suite*, 2003) and *Barrio Cuba* (2005), and that classic for all

time which is, undeniably, *Fresa y Chocolate*.



### Parallel fates

The documentary and the animated film were marked by the very experimentation and commitment which the triumph of 1959 set in motion.

Faithful to their time and to the political and social transformations of those first years, they opened the way as passionate narrators and setters of the Island's course.

The documentary which, in contrast to works of animation, did indeed enjoy an existence 1959, flourished in all of its splendor in the form of the *Noticiero ICAIC Latinoamericano*. Santiago Álvarez, its founder and most prominent practitioner, captured the life of the people as well as the contemporary experiences of other countries of

the continent with his wise lens. *Hasta la victoria siempre* (*Until Victory Always*, 1967), *Now!* (1964); *Hanoi, martes 13* (*Hanoi, Tuesday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, 1967), among many other memorable films, underscore the significance of events like the death of Che in Bolivia, the racial abuses in the United States, and the Vietnam war.

Meanwhile, animated film, with *La prensa seria* (1960), the first work by Jesús de Armas, would find its place in the Animated Drawing Department of the ICAIC.

From that point on, a project conceived from artistic experimentation and destined for an adult audience was developed. From the very same Jesús de Armas would come *Remember Girón* (1961) and *La quema de la caña* (*Burning of the Sugar Cane*, 1961), which would chronicle the mercenary events at Playa Girón and the terrorist acts by Yankee small aircraft against agriculture.

For half a century, documentary work and animated films have drunk from the rich nourishing fluid of the Island. Documentary through the mastery of creators like Sara Gómez, Nicolás Guillén Landrián, Octavio Cortázar and a long list of others like Juan Carlos Tabío, Fernando Pérez and Daniel Díaz Torres, for whom this genre was the school which would professionally form them in their craft, in order to later learn fiction film

Animation discovered, for its part, in the singularity of Cuban culture the key to creating its characters, who found with the arrival of Elpidio Valdés the defining face for those productions destined for a children's audience. Series taken from comics, from la Gugulandia, by Hernán Henríquez, to el Yeyín by Ernesto Padrón; notable didactic children's books like *La Silla* (*The Chair*, 1975), by Juan Padrón, o *El paso del Yabebirí* (1987), by Tulio Raggi (based on story by writer Horacio Quiroga); as well as *Filminutos* and *¡Vampiros en La Habana!* (*Vampires in Havana*, 1985), with their very Cuban sense of humor aimed at more adult minds, have left a pleasant mark in the annals of Cuban animation.



Together all, short, medium, and feature-length films today amount to more than 5,000 titles. And they have understood how to walk hand in hand with the Revolution during these five decades, be it in the form of fiction, documentary chronicle, or animated creation. Narrating, debating, educating, building... with the full certainty that Cuban cinematographic art must be accompanied always by the light of creativity and, beyond the noise of clapper, by the pith of action.

**Translated by Richard K. Curry**