

REVIEWS

Strawberry and Chocolate flavoured cuban culture

BY REYNALDO GONZÁLEZ

A recent cuban film, *Strawberry and Chocolate*, directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tavío, took all the leading prizes at the XVth Festival of New Latin American Cinema, held in La Habana, Cuba, and has become an unmatched success story in the island, also winning the Berlin Festival's Silver Bear along with other awards. The writer and essayist Reynaldo González maintains that the film is more than just a happy enumeration of unpleasant situations, that he has suffered also, and that it is part of a project of renewal that cuban culture must necessarily undergo, in order to understand better what intolerance elevated to political culture meant. This essay cuts into the essence of the hardest years that cuban artists experienced during the euphemistically termed "grey quinquennium", that was really a very long nightmare, a wound still open because bureaucratic acknowledgements and incentives can't simply heal it.



T. Gutiérrez Alea and Che Guevara.
Historias de la Revolución.

1. A SUBJECT FOR AN EXCEPTIONAL FILMMAKER.

Many believe God is on their side,
others beg him to let them be at
his side... Island saying.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea is one of the cuban cinema directors that has international standing. Yet not because he has pandered to popular tastes or to distributors' demands, but due to his ability for narrating significant stories.

His work was part of a movement that came to be called New latin American cinema, and it was new indeed because its directors refused to continue churning out fatalistic formulas and trite rancher cinema themes, or stories of seamstresses battered by the waves of virtue and vice.

He told us about the bourgeois man perturbed by the impact of revolution in *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, a representation of the upper and middle classes that were facing the emergent social phenomenon that would bring them toppling down, and of the aristocrat slaver of the nineteenth century in *La última cena*, (*The Last Supper*), prone to religious sentiments that make him turn a group of serfs into "apostles of Christ" during one evening only to behead them next morning. He

narrated the regressive decadent process of the cuban national middle class in *Los Sobrevivientes*, (The Survivors), and the ironic outcome that the imposition of an ideal during the sixteenth century brought about when it turned destructive, in *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios*, (A cuban fight against demons).

Films like *Las doce sillas*, (The twelve chairs) or *La muerte de un burócrata*, (Death of a Burocrat), are indebted to the picaresque tradition, that a castilian analyst called “hungry cunning”, a popular subversive tool. With this material and his tendency to populist inflexions, his work has revealed artistic mastery, keeping to the tradition of the *cinéma d’auteur*, that poses demanding questions to an audience and doesn’t merely drug them up. Gutiérrez Alea stands out in cuban cinematography, that is vocationally distanced from commercial trends, as one of the most talented directors in the field of contemporary reality, including the not very satisfactory result of *Hasta cierto punto*, that dealt with considerable emphasis on a theme, that of cuban machismo, which Pastor Vega treated much more efficiently in his film *Retrato de Teresa*.

If something characterizes the work of Gutiérrez Alea it is the fact that very clearly defined arguments enable him to expand his thoughts on history and to suggest different contents. He is one of

the great masters of cuban cinema, together with Humberto Solas in fiction, and Santiago Álvarez in documentary. He has often come up with polemics because he has lived life intensely. His resources, those of contemporary intellectual discourse, (distance and proximity required for the rationalization of emotion), allow him to move with dexterity in themes and problems that stemmed from a socialism conditioned by the blockade and economic dependency, improvisation and schemes that the cuban process wasn’t able to avoid despite the autonomy of its origin, its leadership and the impetuous health and resilience of national culture.

One could expect from Gutiérrez Alea that he would get involved in any matter deemed “problematic” without succumbing to triumphalist propaganda or giving in to irrational scepticism, two of the most serious dangers that prey on artistic cuban creation. He has succeeded in doing so with his film *Strawberry and Chocolate* that has scored highs in ticket sales and has become debating fodder for intellectuals. Its mighty success has meant that a subject never before treated with such stark sincerity has reached homes, offices and places of public meeting.

It benefitted from the collaboration of another sardonic and analytic producer, Juan Carlos Tavío, (*La Permuta* and *Plaff*), who worked on a script by Senel

Paz. They started with a critical work and remained faithful to its literary condition, *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo*, (The Wolf, the Forest and the New Man), written by the script writer himself. Alea, Tavío and Paz dared to tread slippery ground, to satisfy certain long standing demands of cuban contemporary culture: the marginalization of homosexuals, the instrumentalization of prejudice during a recent period, yet beyond that, a deeper seated intolerance, derived from idealized notions on the behaviour of individuals in society.

Strawberry and Chocolate tells of the difficult friendship between David, a young communist, sexist and prejudiced, and Diego, a non-closet homosexual, a “mad girl” as cuban argot says. Parallel stories with their respective contexts reveal double standards, political dogmatism and the recurrence to the blackmarket as a means of survival in the dire conditions of the blockade and an economy that isn’t able to solve in any way the problems of home-market consumption.

Things get complex because the subject is not isolated, and it precipitates a social convulsion that is set on revising everything. The anecdotal background and the narrative angles had to reflect the various thorns of a problematic situation where oppressors and oppressed were locked in a struggle between tradition and the need for

reform, where assent was given by inherited concepts and the pressing obligation to subvert them. This leads us to an ethical problem that has been shaped by force of history, with many setbacks, but upholding to a reforming will that nobody in their sane mind can doubt.

It is true in general that almost all the work of cuban film-makers can be grouped into this kind of ethic reflection exemplified through anecdotes. Some recent films emphasize debate, mainly those already mentioned by Alea and Vega, *Un hombre de éxito* by Humberto Solás, *Papeles secundarios* by Orlando Rojas, the tales of *Mujer transparente*, especially “Laura” by Ana Rodríguez, *Adorables Mentiras* by Gerardo Chijona, and the controversial *Alicia en el Pueblo de Maravillas* by Daniel Díaz Torres, to which cuban creativity owes much, despite its problematic reception; another chapter of an ongoing series that threatens the future of the cinema screen: excessive intolerance.

If it is true that the concern for an ethics that is progressively defined as it runs into difficulties, (the same ones that beset our society), could determine our cinema’s character, it is equally evident that of the arts it has been the one that has approached reality in Cuba with the greatest freedom and lack of constraint, even when “random gales” devastated the cultural arena with tremendous force.

Its premier showings in La Habana broke all audience expectations well before it went into the provincial circuit, and that is considering that in Cuba the cinema has been a great public concern. “If we can interpret the evidence correctly”, said a north american cubanologist visiting the island, “then the mile long queues symbolize the success of the plot and the approach, they constitute a criticism of incalculable effect because it turns into a majority concern a problem that had never before been treated so directly. In this sense the film acts as revulsion for discriminatory concepts upheld over a long period of time.”

The very existence of the film already proves that things have began to change with respect to the gay minority in Cuba, yet that “the authorities didn’t make such a keen effort to try and eradicate anti-homosexual feelings as they did when it came to bettering the consideration due to the blacks and to women, for example.”

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea had once again touched an issue that stirred deep held popular anxiety. The challenge was also far-reaching, in a context where homophonic prejudices are the result of an understanding that the majority has of sexual affairs as a whole. For future analysts wishing to explore certain presumably implicit themes of cuban culture, this topic will require more detailed judgement, from an

interdisciplinary basis, in order to determine exactly what our idiosyncrasy is, including the areas of popular beliefs and its myths, not as radical as was esteemed initially, until we have seen how many of these homophobic criteria have been injected and overdimensioned, when not clearly instrumentalized during different periods of our history.

The other implications of the plot and what Alea proposed to express through it, as he tends to do, lent it an unimagined transcendence. *Fresa y Chocolate* was destined to be much more than an exceptional film. For the moment I prefer to analyse the context of this anecdote and what the 70’s meant for the cuban cultural life that saw the birth of the friendship between the young undergraduate communist and the homosexual emerged from the closet. And it isn’t a whimsical insistence, for in the film is debated with understandable emphasis the fate of the art work that challenges established guidelines and the personality that loves its own national culture as opposed to canons that were imposed as ideal and exclusive for the construction of a new kind of society.

II. GREY QUINQUENNIUM OR LONG TERM NIGHTMARE?

“The problem is that that isn’t literature. There’s nothing there. Just clichés. They only forgot to put mujik instead of “guajiro” (Diego).

Although the much decimated Cuban press has only devoted promotional notes to the film, without going on to analyse the significances of its content, this fact is already significant for those accustomed to reading between the lines. Such propagandistic praise would have been impossible a few years ago, as indeed the existence of the film itself. The posture of the Cuban government, that doesn't usually participate or establish debates on such matters, is obviously one of atonement for past errors that many Cuban and foreign critics have reminded them of, and which only served to increase distances on behalf of personalities that had previously offered support.

It is evident that within the Cuban structures of film production and distribution, without express governmental approval the making of a film such as *Fresa y Chocolate* wouldn't have been possible, for it is not content just to tell a story but goes on to judge behaviour. Two things are therefore clear. It exists because it gained government approval and it means that something is changing in Cuba, despite the immobilism that its adversaries continue to denounce and that many of the organizers would like to take refuge in, fearful as they are of the *horror vacui* that inevitable reform will bring.

At the last Habana Festival, directed by the Cuban Pastor Vega, the same man who a decade ago made an impassioned

and firm defense of women against machismo. (*Retrato de Teresa*, Portrait of Teresa), his film *Vidas Paralelas*, (Parallel Lives) treated the subject of the hardships homosexuals suffered due to intolerance. One of his characters was a gay man who emigrated to the US hoping to live more comfortably, and who didn't find happiness. The paradox of a non-closet life awaited him, but at the expense of assuming the implications of life in a sophisticated ghetto. In another successful Cuban film, *La Bella del Alhambra*, by Enrique Pineda Barnet, a homosexual earned the audience's sympathy. He was a pathetic stereotype of the triumphant vedette, with unconditional devotion to his whore-mistresses.

Yet the occasions have been rare when members of the gay minority have been sympathetically portrayed, beyond the

standard caricature that pandered to machoist criteria in vogue. *Fresa and Chocolate* transcends contextual reference and becomes an accusative test of intolerance in its broadest sense. It strikes home to an exceptional degree, and given its intelligent network of related themes, it offers ideas that go much beyond the suffering of a marginalized community.

It is quite astonishing that in a country where machismo and anti-homosexual prejudices were intensified rather than relaxed by factors that foreign observers have persistently emphasized, many heterosexual spectators end up identifying with the gay character and are moved when the young communist and the gay mad-girl embrace in a finale that stirs all. This story is told by a Cuban film, after the hardship of real experience, without ignoring the fact



Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. *Strawberry and Chocolate*.

that homophobic prejudice and the steps taken to repress homosexuality seriously damaged our cultural life and created a climate of mistrust and insecurity.

The issue reached boiling point during the 70's, when many actors and theatre directors were dismissed from their post and when a type of pogrom was imposed on all of those who maintained relationships with a public, with children or with students. This marginality sought justification in the moral dictates approved by a Congress of Education that eventually became of Education and Culture, (beginnings of 1971), and has gone down in intellectual memory as a bitter reality. This purge attacked university lecture rooms, the printing world, public offices related to culture and education; political strategies eventually tainted everything to the point that motivations and causal reasons became confused as this movement gained a significance that had drastic effects for cultural life as a whole.

Cuban theatre, for instance, that had for other latin american countries enviable standards of quality and owed its renaissance to government sponsorship, still hasn't recovered from the effects of that policy, despite the efforts and the energy of the present cultural administration. A similar purge was suffered by renown authors whose literary expression would never again be the same even though atonement was

officially made for the policies enforced against them.

Some cases gained notoriety, like the one of Cuba's greatest lyrical poet, José Lezama Lima, who paid with ostracism the international fame of his novel *Paradiso*, where references to homosexuality are manifold; from being President of the Writer's Union he suddenly became a "non-member". His seventieth anniversary was marked by the publication of several of his works, but then followed deep silence, although he had the respect of those who recognized his career and knew he was a great insular poet; yet they could do nothing to avoid a predestined fate. The most significant cuban playwright of the twentieth century, Virgilio Piñera, had to endure a period of hostility and silence akin to Lezama's, until his death.

His works were put in the drawer of inappropriate literature; his life was extremely disrupted. Now we have his sad unpublished texts and his private correspondence, that literary scholars discuss, in seminars and conferences that hinge on his work.

Behind these grand names, other writers were forced to adopt silence. They make up a long list, in a country where art and creativity seem to find privileged circumstance. They took on anonymous jobs in libraries and printing firms. Some suffered in the quality of their work, embittered and anathematized. Others took the path of exile. It was the time when the official cultural directorate tried to impose the models of "socialist realism" that came from Eastern Europe, with evident contempt for rich, local culture.



Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. *Strawberry and Chocolate*.

Cuban writers had a western tradition symbolized by their greatest names: Lezama Lima, Virgilio Piñera, Alejo Carpentier or Nicolás Guillén, the latter an author of elegies and songs that were fully communist, yet completely separate from the rigid schemes of “real socialism”. Painters continued to admire their masters: Wifredo Lam, René Portocarrero, Amelia Peláez and many names that kept up a modernity related to the avant-garde traditions, including a local and very free adaptation of abstract expressionism that became exemplary, an art that Raúl Martínez excelled in, and who, for a long spell after, once he had got rid of the contempt surrounding him, became the iconographer of the revolution.

Writers and poets looked to their own roots for inspiration in order to shrug off such impositions and excepting a few opportunists and hangers on, they joined together against the aggressors. Intuition and wisdom helped them on, though in the institutions that governed and valued culture dogmatic rules prevailed, propelled by arrivism, in an eminently centralized society. Prestige, and also the chance of publishing and distributing their work, could only come from this sphere, but for them, as for Kafka’s mythical character, the door was closed. Although they loved the revolutionary process and had sworn loyalty to it, they were attacked by those in authority. With many regrets they accepted an involuntary inner exile, which was a

dramatic thing that nobody saw as a farse.

The moment of the “revolutionary mouth clamp” and of the avid emerging “talents” who were given posts at the head of institutions had come. It wasn’t a question of those who were promoted in the civil service following an order of merit and seniority, but of cunning fishermen in troubled waters. They began to practice literature, theatre, music or the fine arts, to fulfil professions that they understood to be strictly disciplinarian, and rising to the challenge, they took advantage of their “hour and moment” to impose lucid “creations”, lacking in depth and effect, yet very attuned to official trends. The empire of Socialist Realism didn’t lack its creole Tsars and Tsarinas built to domestic specification, generating a court that enrolled sycophants and buffoons, all of them passionate converts to a truth imported from the East, like dawn itself.

Cuban cultural publications, where before the work of native authors ruled unchallenged, were flooded by translations that flattered eastern Europe. The Union of Cuban writers and artists invented a “cuban school of translation of socialist works”, that appeared in exemplary monographic issues, and which only turned out to be an infamous parodic anthology.

We had to witness a pathetic crusade

against “wimpness”, which meant weakness of character, “foreignness”, if one imitated the corrupt West, because even the world map had to be read the other way round and Cuba ceased to be western as was God’s will, and new extrapolated paths raised the contingent to ultimate reality. Never before was art so much theorized about, and never did true art receive such little promotion at home.

III ABSENCE MEANETH NOT OBLIVION

Today we recall all this as a transient nightmare, yet too recent to be forgotten. Nobody can pretend that the impact and the after effects of that period be ignored. Cuban cultural policy has now tried to rescue those writers who having created significant works, were prevented from publishing them. Those that perished are remembered and commemorated with the bitter taste of regret at the incomprehension that beset their final days. Those that stayed in the country and who endured, are now saved from oblivion, published and awarded distinctions of merit. They possess as inherent and underlying worth a more than tried fidelity and a persistence in national cultural values.

The most dramatic case of suicide and exile was that of the prose writer Reinaldo Arenas. His final works become a lacerating criticism and testimony, product of a delirious

imagination, where an understandable paranoia blurs the limits of reality and fantasy. Calvert Casey, an author who opted for exile and also committed suicide, has recently been the subject of an extensive apology in the same magazine *Unión* where he published his last text in Cuba, the ironically entitled tale: *Adiós y gracias por todo*, (“Goodbye and thank you for everything”).

It is evident that all of this is a sign of change, and that currently we are living a time of revision and necessary healing, of which *Fresa y Chocolate* is an integral part. In the past few years there has been the intention of regarding with certain benevolence the work of some exiled writers, previously reduced to the status of “non-persons”, or to those controversial authors who stayed on. Curious things crop up, not always easy to explain.

The poet and author Severo Sarduy who died recently in Paris has received his post mortem consecration. However, the play-wright who after Piñera is considered Cuba’s greatest, José Triana, though he receives his quota of praise when the island’s dramatic repertoire is mentioned, hasn’t seen his plays performed, not even his fundamental work, *La noche de los asesinos*, (The night of the assassins) that for many is the most genuine parable of the need for drastic change in order to begin a new life, to initiate once again the upheaval

of revolution. Then, a writer who in exile degenerated from great innovator of cuban narrative to a propagandist of dead-end revenge, Lino Novás Calvo, had his works beautifully and carefully published, a right one can’t deny him, yet that strikes us as astonishing when other exiled cuban writers of undeniable worth are still in coventry.

A very significant event occurred, along these lines, at La Habana university, an institution that during the black period exercised with particular obsequiousness discrimination against those authors who deviated from the “recommendations” of dogmatism, suspending them from its syllabuses and cornering them into negative categories. The critic José Prats Sariol presided a very full conference room to whose audience he went on to praise one of Cuba’s greatest living poets, Gastón Baquero. The difference lies in the fact that Baquero lives in Madrid since the beginnings of the 60’s and doesn’t stop attacking the cuban revolution in the Spanish and North American press. It was a question of praising a notable disident, not obviating reference to his disidence, yet valuing his literary excellencies.

Sometimes we are caught up in zigzagging motion that is disconcerting. Demands can’t be too inflated in this process of rectification, and especially when referring to those absent. To mention a notorious case, the dramatist

Antón Arrufat, resident in Cuba and who in 1968 had problems because one of his plays was considered irreverent by the censors, *Los siete contra Tebas*, (The seven against Thebes), hasn’t seen any play of his performed on stage for over twenty years, although his books are published and he is consistently praised. This can be interpreted as the failings of a process where the variations of criteria depend on the whim of bureaucrats, or are the result of different, inexplicable contingencies, or perhaps, are the outcome of improvised non-discussed initiatives.

The State has included in the list of the honourable those that it repressed erstwhile, always with great caution and after much deliberation. Nevertheless, beyond this debate that is oriented to analysing and bringing to a close all that the black period entailed, praise and ceremonies of recognition are not sufficient to make good the damage inflicted. It is proof that the cultural body can be damaged by decree, although it can’t be healed by the same method.

In debates and in the specialized press, that due to the circumstances of crisis has only limited edition and erratic distribution, reference is made to what benevolent critics call the “grey quinquennium” and that in effect was a very long decade. They locate its high point between 1970 and 1976, the year the present Ministry for Culture was



Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. *Strawberry and Chocolate*.

founded. Others consider that the mere existence of that institution and the measures adopted to rectify the situation inherited, didn't mean, as would be desirable, a definite change for the better in the adversities that the protagonists of Cuban culture suffered, but the beginning of a transformation that in cultural terms will be appreciable with time.

The story of *Fresa y Chocolate* is set in that "grey" period. Its critical arrows

transcend the characters' strife, striking the heart of mimetism, that was a new-generation "foreignness", under sacralized political attitudes, and come out in defense of Cuban culture, as represented by the homosexual character. Some moments of critical finesse represent this theme, as when the young communist suffers the sovietizing "intoxication" instilled by excessive propagandistic exaltation, that prompts the homosexual's quick ironic snub, steeped as he is in national culture.

As a Cuban film director moved by the work of his colleagues told me, "it is difficult that in so little time somebody is able to express better and more fully the things that have worried us so much". Another film maker who had to put up with the inclemencies of dogmas hostile to creation and circumstances that turned one of his films into a battleground alien to art, said, "that it is worth having lived through these years to see a Cuban film that realizes this act of justice".

What could be considered as the gay community in Cuba, that does not have representative organizations as in other parts of the world, has received the film with joy for it represents vindication. Nonetheless, they admit that the issue will require greater collective effort, against the deep set prejudices of fundamental machismo. It is evident that both are not only referring to the film's story, but to a revision process long overdue.

This feeling has characterised the reception of the film. Some see themselves portrayed on the screen. Others recognize the problem of close friends. They are thankful that without spinning yet another political yarn the film makers were able to find the way of treating such subjects within the story line. This in no way could be achieved by "orientations" of the cultural administration, and far less so, by the press in its present circumstances. Art has broken the ice, from literature to song, and it is understandable that the cuban cinema should do it emphatically, where extremist and populist tendencies were vehemently stopped.

An example of how the problems that *Fresa y Chocolate* describes and considers have motivated cuban creators, that now are overcome by the film and join the queues to see what is already considered as a breakthrough in our cinema's history is Pablo Milanes's song, dated september 1993 and included in a recent LP:

ORIGINAL SIN

for Lázaro Gómez

Two souls
Two bodies
Two men in love
Are going to be expelled from the
paradise
They were to live.

Neither of them is a hunter
Who garlanded their victories with
young boys.

Neither of them have the riches
To calm the wrath of their judges.

Neither of them is president.
Neither of them is a minister.

Neither of them is a censor
of their mutilated desire.
And they feel that every morning

They can see their tree,
their park,
their sun,
like you and I

That they can tear apart their flesh

In Love's sweet intimacy
Like I always desperately penetrate
your womb with my flesh
desparately your womb
with love.

We aren't God.
let's not get it wrong again.

The film *Fresa y Chocolate* comes, with its arrows aimed at all kinds of intolerance, at a moment when the collective awareness of the cubans has matured and rejects elements that the establishment tried to inoculate it with, yet that didn't germinate. The analyst of all this, whose public presentation is anxiously awaited, will have to search

for the symptoms that indicate a healthy change among the publications and the cultural events of the contemporary panorama. There isn't a single specialized review or any cuban cultural event that doesn't proclaim that long awaited rectification, and it is a shared concern that its continuity is maintained and that it will shape other future rectifications. Avoiding overt propagandistic messages, the Cuban Union of Writers and Artists, an institution that wasn't able to reject perverse tendencies and contributed to the deterioration of cuban culture that was deprived of famous names, has started in its reviews a campaign to redress the uptipped balance of the cultural world.

The ticket sales' success story of *Fresa y Chocolate* is the collective seal of approval that the majority in Cuba provides, a majority that is more enlightened than many and that has developed a political sense of awareness and not only the will to consume. Yet whoever sees a simple gay event in Diego's and David's embrace is a myopic observer, or whoever feels content with this acknowledgement isn't able to see the woods for the trees. We welcome the present moment of crisis if it promotes a revision of those values that predominate in cuban life and an undeniable reaffirmation of national identity. This choice includes all flavours, which means all options and all interpretations.