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Tomas Gutierrez Alea

When *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT*—the first feature-length film from post-revolutionary Cuba to be seen in the U.S.—was released here, it upset a lot of people's preconceptions about the Cuban cinema. Most of the major film critics, in fact, expressed surprise that the fledgling film industry of this small socialist island could produce a work with the irony, humor and probing critical intelligence—in short, the aesthetic and philosophical maturity—of a film like *MEMORIES*.

But as film critic Julianne Burton, writing in *Cineaste*, explained it, the Cuban cinema is "one of the most lively and original in the world", so the viewing of almost any Cuban film, *MEMORIES* above all, is sure to "demolish Cold War expectations of sledgehammer socialist realism."

The man largely responsible for helping to demolish the critics' stereotyped notions about socialist or revolutionary cinema is Tomas Gutierrez Alea, one of the senior filmmakers at

the Cuban Film Institute. He was born in Havana in 1928. After graduating from Havana University's Law School, he studied film direction at the famous Italian film school, the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome. Upon returning to Cuba, he joined the cultural society *Nuestro Tiempo* (Our Times) and co-directed a short documentary film, *EL MEGANO*, on the miserable life of the charcoal makers in the Zapata Swamps. The film was quickly seized and banned by the Batista dictatorship.

Upon the triumph of the revolution, he helped organize the cinema section for the Department of Culture of the Rebel Army, and later was one of the founding members of the Cuban Film Institute. He made many documentaries before directing his first feature-length film in 1960, *HISTORIAS DE LA REVOLUCION* (STORIES OF THE REVOLUTION). His subsequent features include *LAS DOCE SILLAS* (THE TWELVE CHAIRS), 1962; *CUMBITE*, 1964; *LA MUERTE DE UN BUROCRATA* (THE DEATH OF A BUREAUCRAT), 1966; *MEMORIAS DEL SUBDESARROLLO* (MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT), 1968; *UNA PELEA CUBANA CONTRA LOS DEMONIOS* (A CUBAN STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DEMONS), 1970; *LA ULTIMA CENA* (THE LAST SUPPER), 1977. He is now at work preparing a new feature.

"In my view, the Sergio character is very complex. On one hand, he incarnates all the bourgeois ideology which has marked our people right up until the triumph of the Revolution and still has carry-overs, an ideology which even permeates the proletarian

strata. In one sense Sergio represents the ideal of what every man with that particular kind of mentality would like to have been: rich, good-looking, intelligent, with access to the upper social strata and to beautiful women who are willing to go to bed with him. That is to say, he has a set of virtues and advantages which permit spectators to identify to a certain degree with him as a character. The film plays with this identification, trying to insure that the viewer at first identifies with the character, despite his conventionality and his commitment to bourgeois ideology.

"But then what happens? As the film progresses, one begins to perceive not only the vision that Sergio has of himself but also the vision that reality gives to us, the people who made the film. This is the reason for the documentary sequences and other kinds of confrontation situations which appear in the film. They correspond to our vision of reality and also to our critical view of the protagonist. Little by little, the character begins to destroy himself precisely because reality begins to overwhelm him, for he is unable to act. At the end of the film, the protagonist ends up like a cockroach—squashed by his fear, by his impotence, by everything.

"So then what happens to the spectator? Why does it trouble him or her to such a degree that s/he feels compelled to see the film again? Because the spectators feel caught in a trap since they have identified with a character who proceeds to destroy himself and is reduced to . . . nothing. The spectators then have to re-examine themselves and all those values, consciously or unconsciously held, which have motivated them to identify with Sergio. They realize that those values are questioned by a reality which is much stronger, much more potent and vital.

"I feel that it is in this sense that the film carries out an operation which is the most revolutionary, so to speak, the most dialectical with regard to the spectator. The film does not humor its audience; it does not permit them to leave the theater feeling self-satisfied. The importance of this phenomenon lies in the fact that it is the pre-condition for any kind of transformation."

—Excerpt from an interview
with Tomas Gutierrez Alea by
Julianne Burton, *Cineaste*,
Summer '77

