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# CUBA.4.alea.



*La Ultima Cena*

G.C. What sort of research was involved in making the film The Last Supper?

G.A. The plot is based on a very short paragraph in the Cuban historian Moreno Friginal's book "The Sugar Mill", which states: "In 1797, the priest Antonio Nicolas, the Duke of Estrada published an 'Explanation of Christian doctrine suited to the capacity of simple Negroes.' The Duke was aware that religious instruction was in crisis. Sometimes this was the Negro's fault for not appreciating the good that was being done to him. For example, his Excellency the Count de Casa Bayona decided in an act of deep Christian fervour to humble himself before the slaves. One Holy Thursday he washed twelve Negroes' feet, sat them at his table, and served them food in imitation of Christ. But their theology was somewhat shallow and instead of behaving like the Apostles they took advantage of the prestige they thus acquired in their fellow-slaves eyes to organise a mutiny and burn down the mill. The Christian performance ended with rancheadores (men whose job it was to pursue and capture fugitive slaves) hunting down the fugitives and sticking on twelve pikes the heads of the slaves before whom His Excellency had prostrated himself" (1)

That is all we had to go on. We could not get hold of the original document quoted by Friginals, but this paragraph seemed sufficiently suggestive on its own as evidence of the hypocrisy that can be found lurking behind the notion of the "Christian Spirit," which is of course an important element in the formation of our national consciousness and has had a profound effect on our culture, as part of bourgeois ideology.

Fortunately the text of Moreno Friginals provided us with a source of facts and suggestions with which to interpret that moment in Cuban history when the creole Cuban bourgeoisie was consolidating its power, based on sugar production. With this initial stimulus, we began to investigate the period in greater detail. Mariña Eugenia Haya, one of the script-writers, did a lot of work in reconstructing this period, which helped us at every level, from costume design and accurate portrayal of setting to work with the actors on their particular roles. Moreno Friginals also gave us a lot of additional information and was always at hand to answer any questions. The film was therefore a result of very rigorous team-work.

The most difficult part of the research was that which dealt with the world of the slaves, since obviously no first-hand accounts exist. Yet once again we managed an imaginative reconstruction which was not too excessive. Martínez Furé was a great help in deepening our understanding of the African elements in our culture.

This early research created a solid basis on which to work and made the task of the main script-writer, Tomás González, a lot easier.

G.C. The Last Supper can be seen as part of a movement in our cinema to examine the theme of slavery in different dramatic forms. How do you assess your film within this broader context? Is it a continuation of, or break with, the work of other films?

G.A. Significantly the first major film to deal with this theme is El Otro Francisco by Sergio Giral, which maintains an analytical distance. It offers a way of understanding the problem of slavery from a present day perspective, by analysing the class structure. This was a necessary first step if we consider that slavery is a part of our historical reality which to some degree conditions the present. Certain sectors of our society are still confused about this issue.

Rancheador is completely different. The theme is treated with more dramatic freedom since it in some ways reflects the earlier film by Giral. It provides a different - and supplementary - viewpoint by analysing the character of the rancheador who is a "mercenary," that is to say a man who serves the dominant class in its 'dirty work' of direct repression, a man who sells himself as such.... Recent events in Angola and the rest of Africa have served to underline how topical this theme is.

The Last Supper does have some point of contact with these films, but it is more reflexive and treats the theme in greater depth. For although it offers a picture of slavery at its worst moment (the "boom" in sugar production in Cuba which followed the Haitian revolution and the dislocation of the sugar industry there, together with the increasing demands of the world market, producing profound changes in the treatment of slaves, who were exploited in an almost unbelievable manner), The Last Supper also emphatically denounces the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie in their notions of 'the Christian spirit,' which in the long run, always serves their material interests.

I think, however, that the three films complement each other and also that the theme has still not been exhausted. What is important is not to take a unilateral standpoint on what is a very complex issue. Though obviously, given our limited resources, we should not concentrate on one theme, but explore as many different areas as possible.

G.C. Are there any historical parallels that can be drawn between this film and events in other Latin American countries?

G.A. A relatively recent historical event was very important to us, just as everything that happens in "Our America" is significant to our lives and work: the fascist coup in Chile and the support it received from the Christian Democrats. It showed that this group could not transcend its class interests and that despite the 'humanist' pretensions that it always flaunted, it would always in the last instance support those interests.

The emotional impact that this fact had on us made us see clearly that the Count's actions in the film had to be interpreted in the same way. This is an important contemporary point that can be made not only in Latin America and, say, in Spain, but in all parts of the world which have witnessed the deformation of Christian spirit which is embodied in the bourgeoisie and serves as an instrument of its domination. In our case, of course, the situation is different, but we should not forget that these cultural features have been extremely significant throughout our history and have constantly attempted to fight their way to the surface. It is important to "get to the roots" of this problem.



G.C. The supper scene obviously provides the dramatic nucleus of the film and the moment of maximum complexity. How did you write and film this scene?

G.A. The supper scene can almost be taken as an autonomous unit, a film which could perhaps be coherent if seen on its own. It was obviously the most difficult sequence to film. For one thing, it is the scene where the slaves are presented as people, not just as a simple mass which serves the main action. The particular and specific characters of several of the slaves who momentarily play the role of apostles, are developed and the drama of each man is expressed. This was very difficult since, as I said earlier, we could not rely on documents of the slave world, because this world has generally been seen from the outside. Imagination played a crucial role at this stage.

Also, it is a sequence that lasts nearly an hour and takes place in its entirety in the dining-room. There was a danger of it becoming too static and we had to find a way of maintaining dramatic interest within the very narrow limits of the situation. We rehearsed this part with the actors as if it were a play and this allowed the actors themselves to come up with a series of suggestions and also to feel more comfortable when it came to filming. Obviously, we could count on the exceptional support of the actor Nelson Villagra throughout the scene, but the contribution of the rest of the cast (not all of whom were professional actors) was important in achieving an organic unity.

G.C. How is this film related to the rest of your work?

G.A. The Last Supper develops a historical theme. It takes up the experiences of Una Pelea Cubano Contra Los Demonios (A Cuban struggle against the Devils), but in a positive way, trying to overcome certain limitations that are obvious in that film. Dialogue with the public is what in the last instance determines the scope and significance of any work, quite independent of good intentions, and is a factor which conditions the development of cinematographic language. It is not enough to say important things, or what one considers to be important, or try to reveal some essential aspect of reality. It is necessary for these things to be said in a way which strikes a chord in the spectator, who will therefore react accordingly. If we want the cinema to have (in some way) a productive social function - and in the society that we are constructing it will be productive in so far as it provokes the spectator to participate actively in social life - the language used must be capable of establishing effective communication. We should not try to avoid the risk of non-communication simply by confining ourselves to narrow limits, for this only produces simplification or banality. Throughout the development of the dialogue between the work and the spectator, effective communication can be established at a level of complexity showing a deep understanding of reality. Yet each work that strives to be part of this revolutionary process must always attempt to take a step forward, with all the risks that this implies. The errors or limitations of these attempts are useful in so far as they help directors to "adjust their sights." Therefore I can speak of Una Pelea Cubana... as part of a process that leads to The Last Supper, but that the latter has developed a theme and a language which are extremely clear and direct and therefore much more accessible.

Our historical films are particularly necessary because the view that exists of the past has been systematically distorted by bourgeois historiography. Obviously there are some historians who have dedicated their lives to investigating the past from a different - often Marxist - perspective and their books are real acts of rebellion in the midst of a

reactionary, racist society which is subject to the interests of capitalism. These works help us to deepen the understanding of our past and revindicate the best traditions of struggle. Cinema can learn from these works and can do a lot to help "re-live" certain moments of our past. For us, the significance of such a cinema is directly related to the impact that it can have on the present. The correct (scientific) interpretation of historical fact will enable us to understand and affirm contemporary revolutionary developments.

However, other films - Las Doce Sillas (The Twelve Chairs), Death of a Bureaucrat, Memories of Underdevelopment - deal directly with the present. I think that this area of contemporary cinema is perhaps the most rewarding since it satisfies the need that all of us feel to accumulate the experiences that we are living day by day, and it also ensures that the relationship established with the spectator is as productive as possible. In my opinion, these works should not only show or reveal some essential aspect of present day reality and help to interpret and understand it, but they should also try to develop the social function of cinema: that of equipping the spectator with critical insights into reality, to the extent that he ceases to be a spectator and feels moved to actively participate in the process of daily reality. In other words, not only works which help to interpret the world, but also which help to transform it. Although at this moment I want to place more emphasis on contemporary themes, I am not turning my back on historical issues. As I said on another occasion: "Both lines (the past and the present) are parallel only in appearance: they clearly converge in their impatience to come closer to the future. Each foot of film that we produce is marked by this preoccupation with history."

G.C. Could you talk briefly about your future plans?

G.A. Briefly: my latest film is called Los Sobrevivientes (the Survivors). It is a comedy which takes place in the first few years of the Revolution. An haute-bourgeois family with an aristocratic past - one ancestor came over with Columbus, others fought in the Conquest and so on - decide to stay at home with their servants until the sort of "flood", which is how they see the Revolution, dies down. At first they think that it will be over in a few months, but as the Revolution becomes more radical and is consolidated, they realize that the whole thing will take a lot longer. They decide to stock up with all sorts of goods, which will allow them to spend two or three

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years without suffering undue hardship. Above all, they decide that they must rigorously preserve the form of life that they had led up to that moment (habits, ceremonies, etiquette etc.) for it is in this form that they recognize themselves, maintain their identity and find the force to resist. Gradually as their supplies - the material base - start running low, the relationships between the members of the family and the family's relationship with the servants begin to change. They regress in such a way that, while at the beginning the relations are those of capitalism, there comes a time when they have to divide the land - the gardens of the house - among the servants and start a pattern of self-sufficiency which is very reminiscent of feudalism. Later, when the "serfs" can no longer put up with the situation and want to leave, they are kept in the house by force, a move which means that the servants are divided into two groups: one group acting as guardians, the other reduced to the condition of slaves. This causes a further drop in production capacity. The slaves rebel and after an armed encounter, some die and others escape. Only some members of the family remain, and in order to survive, they have to adopt a

We would like to mention the existence of the British-Cuba resource centre at 76, Sydenham Park London S.E.26 where information about Cuba, meetings, film-se

only Chilean film-maker to have produced films on a regular basis (ten films including TV work) since the coup. With hindsight it is possible to ascertain the importance of his work through his exploration of language (linguistic and cinematic) which at the time was often seen as a way of i) not talking about it while everyone did, and ii) not engaging fully with the realities of Unidad Popular.

His first completed project (*Tres Tristes Tigres* '68) while thematically steeped in a more melodramatic mould, reveals an awareness for camera strategy and cinematic expression far beyond that of his contemporaries (cf. Chanan p. 28 and the whole of the excellent interview in *Hablemos de Cine* (Lima, Peru, n.52). Later *La Colonia Penal* (1970-71) much criticised even when shown in Pesaro in 1974 for reasons quite external to the film (see relevant section in interview below) displayed a particular concern for the reciprocal contamination of languages - Spanish and English or official idioms and dialectal expressions - woven into the texture of dominant associations such as colonialism = disease and exploitation = paranoia. *La Expropiación* ('72) with its peculiar confrontation of historical perspectives on aspects of agrarian reforms and *El Realismo Socialista* (also '72) based on the juxtaposition of working class and petit bourgeois environments are polemical films to the extreme. Where the former employs all kinds of cross-fertilisation of genre and techniques (from reconstructed interviews to the melo-est melodrama) to underpin contradictions, the latter relies heavily on clear cut sets of oppositions. The middle ground where all ambiguities are retained is shown to exist in the language used to communicate different interpretations of the same event or, in the case of the workers, words become concepts i.e. truth and reality are contained in the same word. The link between Chilean and French periods is given by the much misrepresented *Dialogos dos Exilados* which in contrast with Ruiz' fiction-work is a document of differing ways of coping with new lives in exile. The French films require a context of their own as Ruiz points out in the interview and we shall return to it in the future, also considering that all the material on the celebrated and very important *L'Hypothese du Tableau Volé* (*Las Ipothesis de el Quadro Robado*) collected in the interview had to be edited out for reasons of space and general considerations of continuity. Nevertheless, even such a cursory survey may outline the un-institutional work loosely included in the term "Allende's Cine".

pattern of primitive communism. As this does not work either, since some are too old and do not want to or cannot work, they reach a point which is very close to a state of savagery. But what is important is that this regression has come about without any loss of the form, and since this form no longer reflects any real situation it is seen as hollow - yet the very strength of their attachment to it means that it survives. Though, obviously, by the end everything points to the fact that it is condemned to disappear, or become transformed... in the long run.

After that I want to take up the theme of *Memories of Underdevelopment* and make a film about a sociologist - a petty bourgeois revolutionary intellectual - who deals paternally with a group of workers. I will try to explore the conflicts that arise from this meeting. It's an old idea that will be taken up as soon as I finish *The Survivors*. (If I survive...)

#### Notes

1. M. Moreno Fragnals *The Sugar Mill* London 1976 pp.53-4

reenings etc. may be obtained. Full membership price: 3 pounds (Student 1.50) entitles member monthly newsletter with information about events and travel Cuba.

Finally, Aldo Francia, a latter day benevolent De Sica-like figure whose main preoccupation has been that of establishing a causal link between the Catholic traditional culture of Chile and Marxian democratic values, has been considered an excellent administrator (the only film-maker honoured with such praise) but a rather weak director. Among his institutional hats (another parallel with the Italian neo-realists rises spontaneously with Carlo Lizzani now director of the new Venice Biennale due to be revived as from this year) Francia held the directorship of the Vina del Mar Film Festival since 1967 and was appointed professor of Cinema Aesthetics even before having made his first full feature film, at the University of Valparaiso. His *Valparaiso mi Amor*, (not to be confused with Ivens' early sixties classic Valparaiso) produced an excellent contrast to Ruiz' early work, more fully steeped in a 'Mexican' melo-tradition. As such his films are the most significant example of popular though 'political' films of this period.

#### Notes

1. This sequence has also been used in other films including *The Spiral* (Chris Marker, Armand Mattelart et al. 1976 - shown at the Cannes film festival), and several television programmes throughout the world.
2. Chanan, op cit. page 41.
3. Bolzoni in "Materiali sul Cinema Cileño" page 23 Pesaro booklet n.61 (1974). 3. My italics.
4. "The things Soto talks about were really secondary and inevitable in a political process as open as ours. Besides, the contrary would have been terrible, frightening: it would have been dictating a line saying 'This is what you have to do, this and nothing but this!'; that would have brought us back to having a cultural model imposed on us." pg.59, op.cit.

In one context the distinctions are clearly outlined in the interview with Med Hondo published in *Framework* 7/8. The notions of radical film language(s) are further explored throughout this issue and we refer the reader to Sanjines' exemplary breakdown on page 31.