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YEAR BY YEAR, THE SPIRIT OF THE HAVANA FILM FESTIVAL IS BORNE ON WINDS OF POLITICAL FEELING THAT BLOW FROM NICARAGUA AND EL SALVADOR, CHILE, BRAZIL AND ARGENTINA.



FILM FESTIVALS come in all shapes and sizes, but they often have certain patterns of growth and development in common. They typically wax and wane over a period of years, sometimes to wax again, sometimes to descend into what Marx, in another context, called a long crapulent depression.

At some stage along the line, they tend to be invaded by politics: Cannes, Venice, Berlin and Oberhausen are only the most obvious examples. There are certain distinctions of course, especially between festivals oriented primarily towards commercial criteria and those devoted to the celebration of the art, or a particular segment of it (like documentary at Oberhausen, animation at Annecy, underground cinema at Knokke, the ethnographic film at the Festival du Réel in Paris) though many of these still serve as market places. Some try to be universal by dividing themselves into sections (Berlin and Cannes, for example), but few deny the commercial function by eschewing prizes (like Pesaro and London).

In principle, marketplace festivals fear political involvement, while the others often regard it as par for the course. But publicists are attracted to controversy like moths to light, and they exist in different guises. Havana is in this respect quite different, a place where, like journalists, they behave themselves. But Havana is also a place which takes politics and prizes together in its stride, and Hollywood film stars rub shoulders with film makers who are listed in Washington as agents of communism and apologists for terrorism.

Accordingly, the mass media in the USA ignore the festival (though *Variety* now reports it), but this only goads the Cubans to greater effort, and in other camps they win friends. Reports on the Festival have recently been featured on public service television arts programmes in Spain and Britain, for example.

There's a curious contrast between the politicization of a number of leading festivals in the Western European bloc, and the commercial respectability of Moscow, the most bureaucratized and apolitical of the festivals I have attended. Havana is the opposite of this too. Year by year, the spirit of the Havana Film Festival is borne on winds of political feeling that blow from Nicaragua and El Salvador, Chile, Brazil and Argentina. (Perhaps Moscow will be changing now.) I've not yet had the chance to visit Leipzig, but would guess that it is the closest in the socialist countries of Europe to the model of a film makers' forum adopted in Havana, where the politics are anti-imperialist and they count in the award of prizes. But the judging in Havana is more imaginative. The year before last was particularly notable in this respect: the first prize for full-length fiction was shared by the two most audacious films, Paul Leduc's *Frida, Naturaleza Viva* (Mexico) and Fernando Solanas (Argentina); titles significantly difficult to render into English, for the oddity of them--*naturaleza muerta* is the Spanish for "still life"-- signals their anti-generic quality. Both of them are ambitious, experimental, postmodern in their anti-narrativity, the first based on the paintings of Frida Kahlo, the second on choreographed tango (for which the film itself invents the untranslatable neologism *tanguedia*), allegorical tapestries of representation and exile respectively, which greatly exploit the pleasure, the *jouissance* of vision.

The vibrancy of Havana at its best arises primarily because Latin American cinema is still relatively young. The movement which the Havana Film Festival celebrates was born only in the 50s. When examples first arrived at film festivals in Europe in the ferment of the 60s, it helped to rejuvenate European ideas about cinema and the medium of film: the shock of *The Hour of the Furnaces* at Pesaro in 1968, the encounter of Rocha and Godard, are moments in this history as notorious as the episodes of the Oberhausen Manifesto, the invasion of Cannes, or Godard punching his producer in the nose on the stage of the National Film Theatre in London and stalking out of the premiere of *One Plus One* (a.k.a. *Sympathy for the Devil*). (The producer had over-ruled how Godard wanted the soundtrack at the end of the film; Godard appealed to the audience to leave, pay the price of their tickets to a fund for Eldridge Cleaver--if I remember rightly--and watch the free screening of his own version outside. The London Film Festival was extremely fair about it: they gave people refunds, and provided cables to power Godard's projector).

The New Latin American Cinema has changed since those heady days too, though to say it has lost its sense of direction would be going too far. Principally what has happened is an enormous expansion of production, with many more people producing more work in more formats and more varied circumstances; inevitably there is more diversity. Equally, much of it is rough-hewn with a sense of urgency, but then this was always true. Symptomatically, the movement has discovered its own maestros in directors who have created new paradigms for the movement, like Brazil's Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Cuba's Tomas Gutiérrez Alea, and

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Argentina's Fernando Birri, the last an inspirational eccentric who now directs the new International Film School at San Antonio de los Baños near Havana, which was opened by Fidel Castro during last December's Festival. These figures are not, however, like so many past masters in Europe, played out. In the past few years, Alea has made the notably critical *Hasta cierto punto* (*Up to a Point*), Birri a remarkable documentary portrait of his friend the poet Rafael Alberti, dos Santos a work commanding strength in *Memorias do carcere*. All three are working on new productions.

In this respect when I look back at Europe from Havana, I don't think of Bergman, Antonioni and Fellini, but Buñuel, Resnais, and Wajda. Buñuel the Latin Americans regard as half their own--Havana has commemorated them with a retrospective--and his final European films are indeed the epitome of magical realism, which is why he seems still alive. Resnais they respect, but would criticize as being too cerebral. There are certainly no parallels, unless a new Argentinian film, *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (*Man Looking Southeast*, dir. Eliseo Subiela), a low budget, low tech, low profile contemporary science fiction story with a droll sense of humour. By the way, Argentinian cinema has emerged since the Colonels were ousted as the most impressive body of work in the whole of Latin America, though Brazil still holds its own.

When it comes to Wajda, Cubans have a nagging problem about his political trajectory, but a remarkable new Brazilian film presents an exhilarating lesson in unconscious parallelism: seen at Havana outside competition, and also at the excellent Latin American Film Conference in Iowa last October, Tisuka Yamasaki's *Patriamada* (*Beloved Country*). Dating from 1984 and the months of pre-electoral ferment, she has taken a trio of characters, and using the direct filming techniques which Wajda exploited in his *Solidarity* films, *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, inserted them into the scenario and scenes of popular agitation of the moment. As in Wajda too, the central protagonist is a young woman journalist. I even thought I saw a visual echo in a shot where she walks away from camera along a corridor with a swinging gait and her bag slung over her shoulder, but at Iowa, Yamasaki herself told me she hadn't been aware of the parallel. Perhaps it is all the more remarkable if the shot is not an homage, for then the parallel exists in the two directors' independent inspiration to establish their relationship to the immediate political environment in this way.

The symbiotic attraction of fictive and documentary reality is nothing new, of course, to Latin American cinema. The Cubans especially have explored the ways they can be made to interlock in crucial earlier films, like Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*) and Sara Gomez's *De cierta manera* (*One Way or Another*), films belonging to the current of effervescence which peaked in Cuba at the end of the 60s but was shared throughout the continent. However, the intense creative experimentation of those years, which included the most striking films by directors as different as Glauber Rocha, Humberto Solas, Jorge Sanjines and Miguel Littin, is no longer in evidence, *Frida* and *Tangos* notwithstanding. The paradox is that this is precisely what makes Havana such an important festival. It would be important anyway as a forum of cultural politics, but it has grown in eight years to become the focus of a great deal of fervent hope, the serious desire to recapture the inspirational moment.

I often came away from earlier festivals in Havana feeling that the films were less important individually than the sense of the presence on the screen of a continent hitherto invisible as much to itself as to us. There was an infectious sense of self-discovery. People were more in agreement with the distribution of prizes than at any other festivals I've attended; that was because the juries were representative, and film makers felt judged by their peers. This is still true, but perhaps a turning point has been reached. The Festival last December was the largest ever, with more resources invested in it by the Government than before; the stage management of the awards ceremony at the end is now a cross between a political rally and the Academy Awards. The Festival has been expanded to include video and television (which makes it almost unwieldy; perhaps the sections should run consecutively instead of concurrently). There are more cinemas and viewing rooms in use, with new projectors for both film and video; there are retrospectives as well as competition and market screenings, music and dancing at night and the most marvellously festive atmosphere.

It is ironic, then, that Cuban cinema itself is weaker than, say, fifteen years ago, long before the Festival was thought of. It is mistaken to think this is because the creative force of the Revolution has waned, simply that the film makers in Cuba have lost their *vanguardismo*, above all to the plastic artists (as reported in the recent edition of *Social Text* on "Contemporary Cuban Culture"). In fact, if the Cubans have always been intensely conscious of the power of the media in ideological conflict, today they perceive more clearly the symbiosis between the struggle against external hegemony and the health of the country's internal

media. There is new emphasis on the need to develop critical attitudes. Fidel has even recently declared that "just and timely criticism is mightier than a state, mightier than a party!" This was a month before the 1986 Film Festival, at the closing session of the Congress of the Journalists Union in November, where he explained in more prosaic terms that there needs to be more cooperation between journalists and officials of the Party and State. The idea was not to wait for news to turn up but to go out and look for it, find out what was going wrong, follow it up. There is fresh determination abroad in Cuba to grapple with things straight up, suggesting certain parallels with the Soviet Union but independently arrived at. There is a great deal of energy, and a lot of it is focussed on the media. The Film Festival has been co-opted into the general effort, and public attendance at the festival was half a million (an excellent number, especially when cinema attendance in Cuba is falling). It was often front page news, with plenty of coverage on the inside pages too. There were video cameras everywhere, and a closed circuit TV channel for the festival itself, with clips and interviews and news from morning to midnight. Inevitably the Festival is losing the intimacy of its first few years and this time there was less consensus over the prizes. But the exchange of opinions about them in the bars and around the hotel swimming pools, and the debate in the special seminars--the main one last December was on women--was passionate, intense and impressive.

For myself, I was delighted that Julie Christie became the first English winner of a prize at Havana when she shared the best actress award for the title role in *Miss Mary*, and accepted it modestly with four words: "*Muchas gracias, America Latina*." (This was not so much, on my part, a patriotic response as the brief hope that it might just help to catch some attention for the Festival from the press back home). The Brazilian Fernanda Torres, who shared the prize, deserved it equally for her bravura performance in *Yo se que te voy a amar*, but I liked this film by Arnaldo Jabor a lot less than the Argentinian picture directed by Maria Luisa Bemberg. *Miss Mary*--about an English governess in Argentina in the 30s--is an allegory about social illusions, those of the Argentinian bourgeoisie about English culture, those of the English about Argentina. The other is a piece of self-enclosed experimentalism about a young couple engaged in the battle of the sexes, which would work much better on stage or as a television two-hander. Both were popular, but among different camps.

In memory of
 Jorge Silva



The top prize was also divided fairly, between the latest film by Humberto Solas, *Un hombre de éxito*, and a first feature by the 64-year-old Brazilian director Zuzana Amaral, *La Hora de la estrella*. The former is a moral chronicle of political opposition between two brothers, with the emphasis on the opportunist one; unfortunately it is relatively inaccessible to an audience without a good working knowledge of pre-Revolutionary Cuban history, and by those who know, I am told it is open to the criticism that it misrepresents the behaviour of the Cuban *haute bourgeoisie*. It is beautifully shot (Livio Delgado won the award for best cinematography), and includes an exceptional performance by the *doyenne* of Cuban actresses, Raquel Revueltas. The film by Zuzana Amaral is altogether more accessible, a gentle portrait, both moving and humorous, of the cultural deprivation of a young woman from the North East who goes to Sao Paulo in search of work and a husband; an important addition to the work of feminist film makers in Brazil, already the largest group in the continent.

I greatly enjoyed Marcos Zurinaga's *La Gran fiesta*, easily the best movie I've yet seen from Puerto Rico, and again because of its allegorical qualities. The genre is a social drama crossed with a Second World War spy story unfolding together at a society ball, with amorous and political themes and characters intertwined and some pyrotechnic editing. E.G. Marshall appears as Governor Tugwell; the photography is classy; the music marvellous; and there's a brilliant guest appearance by Raul Julia. It was not as popular, however, as the Argentinian film *Hombre mirando al sudeste* directed by Eliseo Subiela, another strongly allegorical essay but (perhaps as befits the country of Borges) a metaphysical one. Hugo Soto and Lorenzo Quinteros play a kind of dual protagonist, the one a long-suffering patient at a mental hospital, a Christ-like figure among the inmates, whom the other, a psychiatrist, discovers to have a remarkable intelligence quotient. The psychiatrist is kind and humane, his patient benign: humanity split between two different kinds of intellect. The only thing wrong with the patient is his claim to be an extraterrestrial. The portrayal of his special powers climaxes in a virtuoso sequence which impelled the Cuban audience to applause, where the extraterrestrial leads a strangely bacchic dance at an open air concert to the last movement of Beethoven's *Choral Symphony*, and to cap it, mounts the podium and takes the baton from the conductor, with remarkable consequences.

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At the previous year's Festival, Beethoven's *Choral* cropped up twice, sung in a Spanish version of Schiller's poem (the poem originally entitled *Ode to Freedom*). Once was in Marlene Franca's documentary tribute to the Brazilian liberation priest Frei Tito, whom imprisonment drove to his suicide: it is the anthem in the cathedral at his funeral. The second time was in an anonymous video from Chile, where it was sung on the streets in Santiago beneath the banners of the women proclaiming "*Somos mas*"--"We are more." Though the new Argentinian film is uneven, the orchestra sequence was the most thrilling I saw this year in Havana, symbol of the deep level at which the cultural process is at work in Latin America: the way it ingests the cultural icons of its imperialized past and revalorises them--for a Cuban audience as much as the visiting European.

The film which moved me most, however, was Jorge Duran's *El color de su destino*, a Brazilian production about Chileans in exile which left a deep impression on many viewers, but also divided opinion. It is impossible to do justice to such a richly complex film without another viewing. Genre: sort of a coming of age story. Protagonist: an adolescent trying to exorcise the memory of his elder brother killed in the aftermath of the coup against Allende. Subplot: his burgeoning sexuality, relations with girls. Character: sensitive type, with artistic talent. Except that these elements are not hierarchical in the film; they are expertly intertwined, with the narrative rhythms of the French rather than the North American examples of genre. However, it was criticized for its milieu: Chilean exiles don't always live in middle class comfort. I cannot explain its considerable effect without speaking of another film, which didn't

manage to reach Havana but was shown a couple of months earlier at the University of Iowa Conference. Marilu Malet's *Journal Inachevée*--she now lives in Québec--is the most extraordinary example I've seen of a genre which Chilean film makers have themselves created, the film of exile, which Zuzana Pick at the Iowa conference perceptively described as quintessentially multilingual (like several films by Raul Ruiz, none of them seen in Havana). This is a deeply reflexive film in the style of a self-observational documentary; the remarkable manner in which the film maker probes the most delicate and elusive aspects of exile behaviour and her relationship with her husband (a Canadian film maker) gains its subtle force from her feminist integrity. *El color de su destino*, which is likewise traced in the clash of comprehension of different tongues, approaches, I think, a similar honesty about adolescent male experience. Both, in any case, are films which deserve to be seen as widely as possible.

At the Iowa Latin American Cinema Conference there was a lively discussion on the question of the identity of the movement. Ana Lopez, Cuban-born film theorist at Tulane University, argued with lucidity that we shouldn't talk any longer of the New Latin American Cinema in the singular, but of the new cinemas in the plural, because that is what the movement, through its very growth, has become. This is signally different from the view of a number of Latin American film critics who don't visit Havana, that the movement only exists in the imagination of political wishful thinkers and it's never really had an identity. Fernando Birri counters with such notions by speaking of the movement as the active desire for utopia, and no one can deny that it's voluntaristic. But that's precisely where it garners half its energy, and the Havana Festival continues to be the place to go and refuel.

Michael Chanan is a writer and film maker. He is the author of The Dream that Kicks (RKP 1980) and editor of Twenty-Five Years of New Latin American Cinema (BFI 1983) and has made a number of documentary films of Latin American Cinema and on music for Channel 4, and the BBC. He is currently working for the Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea on the feature film Caliban, based on Shakespeare's Tempest.