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An *objet d'art* creates a public that has artistic taste and is able to enjoy beauty — and the same can be said of any other product. Production accordingly produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.

KARL MARX

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## PROLOGUE

In 1974, for the first issue of *Jump Cut*<sup>1</sup>, I reviewed *Memories of Underdevelopment* as an exemplar of Brechtian political cinema. That film raised a political issue as vital to us now as it was then: What is the relation of the progressive intellectual to his society and to social change? Later, the Brechtian-style works of Alea's protégés in the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC), Sara Gómez's *One Way or Another* and Sergio Giral's *The Other Francisco* had a similar impact on the *Jump Cut* staff. In these two films, as Alea prescribes in *The Viewer's Dialectic*, form and content "oppose each other, they interpenetrate each other, even to the point where they take over each other's function in that reciprocal interplay."

It was *One Way or Another* that impelled me to write a critical essay<sup>2</sup> on the relation of Marxist dialectics to feminist themes, and more recently I returned to review *The Other Francisco*<sup>3</sup> as a model of filming history. *The Other Francisco* not only reveals the economic basis of black enslavement, but it leads us to analyze different modes of cinematic and verbal discourse which depict the oppressor and the oppressed. Such a film has a special relevance for us in a media culture which never analyzes its own modes of discourse and forgets history.

This Brechtian strain in Cuban cinema, and Alea's analysis of how that style animates and energizes spectators as they return to daily life, stands as a model of a kind of media and a media-spectator relation that we would like to achieve. For those of us outside the Revolution, much of what Alea describes about spectators relation to the cinema sounds utopian. Like all good utopias, it sharpens for us our own sense of progressive tactics and goals.

In most capitalist countries our lives are mediated by a mad relation between commercial media, politics and civic society. The media serves up social relations and political discourse as if through a distorting hall of mirrors in an evil carnival. We know about

<sup>1</sup> *Jump Cut* is a film journal of contemporary cinema published in Chicago about four times a year by Jump Cut Associates, a nonprofit organization. (Editor's note)

<sup>2</sup> *Jump Cut*, No. 20 (1979).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 30 (1985).

toxic waste, unemployment and the two million homeless, but as their image comes and goes on the television screen, the issues themselves are received by viewers as just one more aspect of show. It is easy to shut these social problems out of our minds at the end of the evening news. Some viewers may experience cognitive dissonance according to the uniqueness of their own situation. For example, they may be unemployed in a period designated by national leaders as "economic recovery," but since the media never analyze the structures of recession and inflation as an *ordinary* aspect of capitalism, such viewers may react only emotionally — perhaps with anger, perhaps with self deprecation — when they see that "economic recovery" on their television set.

Hollywood films, television programs, advertising and the statements and image of government leaders presuppose a mass audience. *The Viewer's Dialectic* describes in detail the quality of such spectatorship and its mechanisms. Mass art is sent out to an undifferentiated and infantilized public, to whom it appeals on the most basic, reduced terms. Alea addresses this phenomenon as he describes what happens to people's cognitive processes when both the government and the more explicit fictions around us elicit a Manichean identification of us with the "good," and the rest is seen as "other" or "bad." To this end Alea summarizes the archetypal fiction that he finds in Hollywood film. With a few switches in characters, we can imagine this fiction as being propagated not only by Hollywood but by the government and by the evening television news.

We see Tarzan jumping from tree to tree, daring to swim across a river full of crocodiles, running through arrows which his enemies rain down on him. His enemies are black people who hold his female companion prisoner. Tarzan sends out a huge cry into the jungle and the animals rush to help him. The monkey Cheeta participates, exteriorizing more than any of the others the various emotional states which the adventure provokes (displeasure, unhappiness, fear, trust, joy, enthusiasm...). Finally, Tarzan smiles after having killed a few black men, driven the rest away, and rescued his companion.

Sitting in front of the screen on which those scenes are projected (and it has been like this for a long time everywhere in the world), there might be both blacks and whites in the audience... Through what mechanism can you get this kind of heterogenous public, composed of people of all ages, colors, professions, sexes, classes, etc. to feel the same emotions regarding an action whose profound significance threatens

the moral integrity of at least a good part of that very audience?... the very mechanism of identification or empathy with the hero, *if it is made into an absolute*, puts the spectator in a position in which the only thing he can distinguish are the "bad guys" and the "good guys." Of course, viewers naturally identify themselves with the "good guys" without considering what the main character truly represents. So it [such media] is intrinsically reactionary because it does not work at the level of the viewers' consciousness; far from it, it tends to dull it...

Frequently civic life is completely mediated by its representation on television and film. Or to be more accurate, as Alea describes what happens to the audience for mass art, the media has become a refuge and a compensation for civic life, a waking dream, one that objectifies the needs and illusions of the (white, male) bourgeoisie. Alea correctly locates the goal of radical media in such an era: to awaken people's sleeping consciousness.

We know that people's willingness to see and understand the structures of their world follows upon their lived experience. For example, those who understand oppression and its systematic operation are often those who have experienced both poverty and racism. The ideal progressive media work would be one that draws on and speaks to the experience of the oppressed and also offers a multi-layered analysis of the processes that generate the problems. Alea describes a filmmaking practice in Cuba that aims to stimulate viewers' consciousness and starts them on a process of continued awareness and mobilization. The viewing experience should begin a process which the viewers themselves will complete in daily life. In what would be utopian here, Alea writes of the goal which he and others have set for themselves in Cuba: "Spectators will stop vis-à-vis reality and will face it not as something given but as a process in whose unfolding they are involved."

*The Viewer's Dialectic* offers the prospect of an energizing show, one that stimulates people to think about those concepts which would have a real vitality within their daily lives. Such a show would offer viewers an aesthetic delight tied to effective conceptual discovery. When both media-maker and viewing public know that they can contribute to social process and are mutually seeking how best to do so, a different spectator-show relation exists than with commercial media elsewhere. Most of *The Viewer's Dialectic* analyzes the mechanisms of that new and energized relation.

What is the significance of this ideal relation between art-

ist intellectual and social process, between viewer and show, especially for those of us making media for social change? On the one hand, many Cuban films serve as powerful formal examples of a cinema that seeks to raise viewers' consciousness on many levels — to make people aware of social process, history, media structures, sexual politics and class relations, contradictions and change. However, Alea writes about the aesthetics of feature filmmaking within a state-supported filmmaking Institute that makes movies for an enthusiastic, movie-loving public. The aesthetic issues that raises about spectator-society-mass media relations or about dialectical film style are addressed here more by film and video makers who seem "marginal." We have no post-revolutionary media, and our modes of production and distribution often stifle innovations in film video style and reception. For example, documentaries seen on television, no matter how important the subject is, they usually are very predictable formally and are received in a more or less passive way. We have few ways to promote "dialectical interaction" between viewer, artist, and art work.

Within our constraints, we do have a flourishing radical media culture. The issues we face include considerations of media format — to use video or film, to use film in a polished style and known genre, or to document the concerns of oppressed groups as these groups see themselves? We also face issues of distribution and organizing strategies — to show work in museums, churches, or theaters; to appeal to what sector within an overall framework of coalition politics among progressive groups; to promote outdoor film screenings in urban ghettos; or to encourage teachers to use progressive media in schools and colleges? Certainly these levels of engagement are not mutually exclusive. In each case, Alea's essay encourages us to place these issues in perspective by asking ourselves: What will respond to people's most immediate interest — entertainment? To their most basic need — to feel owners of their destiny? To move them to an ever more profound comprehension of the world, with its many-faceted, interacting structures and contradictions? And to energize the audience to return to daily life impelled and empowered to transform reality and better human life?

This view of artistic practice stands in counterpoint to people's experience of the commercial mass media, and of civic life as show. During the Hitler regime, Bertolt Brecht in exile often warned his fellow Germans against succumbing to the "terror of history," or thinking of fascism as uncontrollable chaos. He called Hitler "the housepainter" in order to bring the tyrant down to human scale and he constantly explained that

history was made by us humans and did not just “happen” to us. In our own times, to make a parallel case, many people know the immorality of the Big Lie that surrounds us. Yet even progressive people often feel a kind of paralysis when immersed in the show which substitutes for civic life. As an antidote to this feeling of paralysis — something which Brecht pointed out in his time and which Alea rephrases in his analysis of Brecht’s aesthetics —, people, especially those motivated as a result of their own oppression, can learn to enjoy understanding the structures of human social life. This enjoyment, what Brecht called the “emotion of logic,” goes hand in hand with working together collectively to shape social process itself.

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March 1985

New York

<sup>1</sup> Julia Lesage has written a book on Jean-Luc Godard and many essays on films by women and on Third World films. She is co-editor of *Jump Cut*. (Editor’s note)

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## INTRODUCTION

Twenty years after taking power, the Revolution has left behind its most spectacular moments. Back in those days our shaken land offered an image, an unusual and one-time-only image: that incredible caravan accompanying Fidel as he arrived in Havana, the bearded rebels, the doves, the vertigo of all the transformations, the exodus of the traitors and timorous ones, the henchmen's trials, and the enemy's immediate response and, as for us, we experienced the nationalizations, the daily radicalization of the revolutionary process followed by the armed confrontations, the sabotages, the counterrevolution in the Escambray mountains, the Bay of Pigs invasion and the October Missile Crisis.

Those events in themselves evidently revealed the profound changes occurring at a pace nobody could have foreseen. For cinema, it was almost sufficient just to record events, to capture directly some fragment of reality, and simply reflect the goings-on in the streets. These images projected on the screen turned out to be interesting, revealing and spectacular.<sup>1</sup>

In these circumstances, stimulated or, rather, pressured by ever-changing reality, Cuban cinema emerged as one more facet of reality within the Revolution. Directors learned to make films while on the go and played their instruments "by ear" like old-time musicians. They interested viewers more by what they showed than by how they showed it. In those first years Cuban cinema put the emphasis on the documentary genre and little by little,

<sup>1</sup> Patricio Guzmán, in notes he wrote before making *Battle of Chile*, said at that time — the months which preceded the fascist coup — he never would have made a fictional film with actors reciting a text, because reality itself, which was unfolding before his very eyes, was changing tremendously. In times of social convulsion, reality loses its everyday character, and everything which happens is extraordinary, new, unique... The dynamics of change, the trends of development, the essence are manifested more directly and clearly than in moments of relative calm. For that reason, it attracts our attention and in that sense we can say it is spectacular. Surely, the best thing to do is to try to capture those moments in their purest state — documentary — and to leave the re-elaboration of those elements reality offers for a time when reality unfolds without any apparent disturbance. Then fiction is a medium, an ideal instrument, with which to penetrate reality's essence.

as a result of consistent practice, it acquired its own physiognomy and dynamism which have enabled it to stand with renewed force, beside more developed film styles which are older but also more "tired."

Now all of that has become part of our history; our consistent revolutionary development carries us inevitably toward a process of maturation, of reflection, and analysis of our accumulated experiences.

The current stage of institutionalization we are living through is possible only because it is based on the high degree of political awareness which our people have attained as a result of years of incessant fighting. But this stage also requires the masses' active, increased participation in the building of a new society. Increasingly, a greater and greater responsibility falls on the masses and, for that reason, we can no longer let the public merely cling enthusiastically and spontaneously to the Revolution and its leaders and, to the extent that the government passes on its tasks to the people, the masses have to develop ways of understanding problems, of strengthening their ideological coherence and of reaffirming daily the principles which give life to the Revolution.

Everyday events occur now in a different way. The images of the Revolution have become ordinary, familiar. In some ways we are carrying out transformations that are even more profound than earlier ones, but they are not as "apparent" now nor are they immediately visible to the observer. These changes, or transformations, are not as surprising nor do the people respond to them only with applause or with an expression of support. We no longer have the same kind of spectacular transformations as we did fifteen or twenty years ago. Cuban cinema confronts that new and different way of thinking about what social processes are going to hold for us because our film draws its strength from Cuban reality and endeavors, among other things, to express it. Thus we find it no longer sufficient just to take the cameras out to the street and capture fragments of that reality. This can still be a legitimate way of filmmaking, but only when, and if, the filmmaker knows how to select those aspects which, in close interrelation, offer a meaningful image or reality, which serves the film as a point of both departure and arrival. The filmmaker is immersed in a complex milieu, the profound meaning of which does not lie on its surface. If filmmakers want to express their world coherently, and at the same time respond to the demands their world places on them, they should not go out armed with just a camera and their sensibility but also with solid theoretical

judgment. They need to be able to interpret and transmit richly and authentically reality's image.

Furthermore, in moments of relative détente, capitalism and socialism air their struggle, above all, on an ideological level and, on that level, film plays a relevant role both as a mass medium, in terms of diffusion, and as a medium of artistic expression. The level of complexity at which the ideological struggle unfolds makes demands on filmmakers to overcome completely not only the spontaneity of the first years of the revolutionary triumph but also the dangers inherent in a tendency to schematize. Filmmakers may fall into this trap if they have not organically assimilated the most advanced trends, the most revolutionary ones, the most in vogue, especially those which speak to the social function which the cinematic show ought to fulfill. That is, filmmakers create cultural products which may attain mass diffusion and which manipulate expressive resources that have a certain effectiveness. Film not only entertains and informs, it also shapes taste, intellectual judgment and states of consciousness. If filmmakers fully assume their own social and historical responsibilities, they will come face to face with the inevitable need to promote the theoretical development of their artistic practice.

We understand what cinema's social function should be in Cuba in these times: It should contribute in the most effective way possible to elevating viewer's revolutionary consciousness and to arming them for the ideological struggle which they have to wage against all kinds of reactionary tendencies and it should also contribute to their enjoyment of life... With this much in mind, we want to establish what might be the highest level which film — as a show — could reach in fulfilling this function. Thus, we ask ourselves to what degree a certain type of show can cause the viewers to acquire a new socio-political awareness and a consistent action thereof. We also wonder what that new awareness and action consists of that should be generated in spectators once they have stopped being spectators, that is, when viewers leave the movie theater and encounter once again that other reality, their social and individual life, their day-to-day life.

Capitalist cinema, when reduced to its state as a commodity, rarely tries to give answers to these questions. On the other hand (and for other reasons) socialist cinema has not ordinarily fully met that demand. Nevertheless, finding ourselves in the midst of the Revolution, and at this particular stage of building socialism, we should be able to establish the premises of a cinema which would be genuinely and integrally revolutionary, active, mobilizing, stimulating, and — consequently — popular.

The expressive possibilities of the cinematic show are inexhaustible; to find them and produce them is a poet's task. But on that point, for the time being, this analysis can go no further, for I am not focusing on film's purely aesthetic aspects but, rather, trying to discover in the relation which film establishes over and over again between the show and the spectator the laws which govern this relation and the possibilities within those laws for developing a socially productive cinema.

T. G. A.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea was born in Havana on December 11, 1928. He graduated in law in 1951 and traveled to Rome to study filmmaking at the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*. In 1956 he returned to Cuba and became director of *Cine-Revista* (documentary, humorous, and advertising shorts), which was distributed throughout Cuba.

He collaborated on the making of *El mécano*, a 16-mm, medium-length film directed by Julio García Espinosa depicting the life of the charcoal workers in the Ciénaga de Zapata, a central region of Cuba. When it was shown for the first time, the Batista (1952-1958) dictatorship's police seized the film.

At the beginning of 1959, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, along with Julio García Espinosa, organized the *Sección de Cine de la Dirección de Cultura del Ejército Rebelde* (Cinema Section of the Culture Directorate of the Rebel Army) where he directed the first documentary made after the triumph of the Revolution: *Esta tierra nuestra* (This Land of Ours).

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea participated in the creation of the *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry) and was a member of its council of directors until 1961. His first feature-length film was *Historias de la Revolución* (Stories of the Revolution).

In 1961 he worked as a war correspondent at the Bay of Pigs and directed, for the *Noticiero Latinoamericano* the documentary *Muerte al invasor* (Death to the Invader). He has published articles and humorous drawings in several Cuban magazines. His book of essays entitled *Dialéctica del espectador* (The Viewer's Dialectic) won the Critic Award in Cuba in 1982. Later on it was published in Mexico and also translated into Italian and Portuguese.

A book about this outstanding Cuban filmmaker entitled *Gutiérrez Alea, os filmes que não filmei* (The Films I Have Never Filmed), written by the journalist and film investigator Silvia Oroz, was published in Brazil.

In recent years Tomás Gutiérrez Alea has divided his time between filmmaking and advising a group of Cuban documentary filmmakers.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- 1950 *Una confusión cotidiana* (An Everyday Confusion)  
(8 mm) Director and screenwriter.  
Humorous short based on a story by Kafka.
- 1953 *El sueño de Juan Basaín* (Juan Basaín's Dream)  
(35 mm) Story writer, collaborator on screenplay and  
aide to director.  
This film was presented as a final project in the *Cen-  
tro Sperimentale di Cinematografia* at Rome.
- 1955 *El mégano* (16 mm)  
Collaborator to the director.  
Short dramatic feature denouncing the hardships of  
charcoal workers in the Ciénaga de Zapata. The char-  
coal workers act in the film. (40')
- 1956-59 *Cine-Revista* (35 mm)  
Director.  
Advertising shorts, newsreels, humorous shorts. (8-10')
- 1959 *Esta tierra nuestra* (This Land of Ours) (35 mm)  
Director.  
Documentary on Cuban peasants' living conditions and  
the changes outlined by the Agrarian Reform. (20')
- 1960 *Historias de la Revolución* (Stories of the Revolu-  
tion (35 mm)  
Director and story writer of the first two stories. Full-  
length film in three parts representing three moments  
in the revolutionary struggle: the attack on the Presi-  
dential Palace and the urban clandestine struggle, *El herido*  
(The Wounded Man); the struggle in the Sierra Ma-  
estra, *Rebeldes* (Rebels); the taking of Santa Clara,  
marking the triumph of the Revolution, *Santa*  
*Clara*. (93')
- Asamblea General* (General Assembly) (35 mm)  
Director.  
Documentary on the First Declaration of Havana. (14')