Productive Memory: “Forward Dreaming” in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s Cuban Films

Not since Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov in the USSR in the 1920s had an innovative national cinema unfolded in the context of revolution until the films of post-revolutionary Cuba did so with directors such as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (1928–1996), Julio García Espinosa (1926–), and Humberto Solas (1941–2008). Alea’s oeuvre in particular engages views to reflect on the challenges facing Cuban society after 1959, and to think about the way that the reality on the ground conforms or contrasts with revolutionary ideals. Even after his death in 1996, Alea’s close associate, Juan Carlos Tabío, has carried those ideas forward into the evolving political, social, and cultural landscapes. Looking back at Alea’s oeuvre reveals it to be a perceptive and even prescient commentary on issues that are still confronting Cuba today, including democratic reforms, gender relations, and the role of religion.¹

Over the course of his 40 years as a filmmaker in Cuba (from 1955 until his death), Alea wrote critical essays on film in which he situated Cuba’s militant cinema within a dialectic – one that pertains not only to film’s relation to the evolving society but that also demands the participation of the spectator in the construction of meaning. At the same time, the director’s successive works are in dialogue with one another and exhibit intertextual relations with larger currents of film history, particularly neorealism and surrealism (as well as engaging in a “negative dialectics” with Hollywood entertainment cinema). His films are revolutionary in form as well as in their content. To appreciate them fully requires attention to their aesthetics.

Alea’s aims as a filmmaker are threefold: to comment critically and constructively on the emergent revolutionary society and thereby aid
in the process of what Ernst Bloch calls “forward dreaming” toward the realization of the stated ideals; to seek the active involvement of the spectator in thinking about the way the future goals will be reached; and to forge a new present out of the memory of the past (including the memory of the artist’s own previous works). This last goal situates his oeuvre within what Ernst Fischer calls “productive memory”:

To imagine what has not yet been objectified, what is not yet present; to combine things which are not yet mutually related, to join them together and to establish an interaction between them; to draw what is to be from that which is remembered, to overstep the inadequate here-and-now, to make what has never yet been seen, conceived of or noticed creatively visible, conceivable and conscious – that is the imagination’s three-fold manner of working.\(^3\)

Cuban cinema came into being under an unusual set of political, economic, and social circumstances, as Alea noted in his address to the Association of Third World Studies in 1993. It was, from the beginning, an avowed revolutionary cinema \(\textit{in content,}\) with an educational mission that Alea describes as consciousness-raising (\textit{conscientización}). Alea and his close ally, Julio García Espinosa, had studied under Cesare Zavattini at the Centro Spertimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, where they were exposed to post–World War Two Italian neorealism, which makes a virtue out of economic necessity by eschewing the familiar narratives and high production values of entertainment cinema. At the start of his cinematic career, Alea would embrace neorealism, which he found adaptable to the difficult material conditions prevailing in Cuba. For his part, Espinosa would express his own take on the neorealist philosophy in his important 1969 essay, “For an Imperfect Cinema,” which Alea summarizes as the call to “put technique in the service of imagination and not the reverse.”\(^4\) Espinosa writes: “A new poetics for the cinema will, above all, be a ‘partisan’ and ‘committed’ poetics, a ‘committed’ art, a consciously and resolutely ‘committed’ cinema – that is to say, an ‘imperfect’ cinema....It is not quality which it seeks in an artist’s work. The only thing it is interested in is how an artist responds to the following question: What are you doing in order to overcome the barrier of the ‘cultured’ elite audience which up to now has conditioned the form of your work?”\(^5\)

In 1960 all aspects of production, distribution and exhibition in Cuba came under the umbrella of the vertically integrated Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC), which in turn