

C U B A S I !

25 YEARS OF CUBAN CINEMASERGIO GIRAL'S SLAVERY TRILOGY:THE OTHER FRANCISCO (1974) (El otro Francisco)SLAVE HUNTER (1976) (Rancheador)MALUALA (1979)

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A number of films produced by the Cuban film institute during the 70's - among them Sergio Giral's trilogy, EL OTRO FRANCISCO, RANCHEADOR and MALUALA, and Tomas Gutierrez Alea's LA ULTIMA CENA (The Last Supper) - investigate the nineteenth century Cuban social formation and the role of sugar in shaping its character, and that of the different social classes by which it was constituted. The picture these films combine to produce is of a deeply troubled colonial slave society with a class of largely Spanish-born plantation owners, grimly determined to prevent the overthrow of their rule by slave rebellion as in Haiti. Their attitudes, opinions and political alliances were all directed to this end, with the consequence that while Bolivar and his followers brought independence from Spain on the mainland, powerful forces in Cuba preferred to keep the island under Spanish rule and maintain the institution of slavery.

The first manifestations of a new Cuban literature date from the end of the 1830's when a number of short-lived literary journals appeared and the first Cuban novels were written. Just as elsewhere in Latin America, they reveal the influence of European Romanticism. For instance, the novel Francisco by Anselmo Suarez y Romero, unpublished till later in the century, on which Sergio Giral's EL OTRO FRANCISCO is based. Already in 1829 there was a Cuban journal called La Moda o Recreo Semanal del Bello Sexo (Fashion or the Weekly Amusement of the Fair Sex). Its pages included salon music - songs and contradanzas - and 'pleasurable literature'. The editor of La Moda was a leading literary figure, Domingo del Monte, the host in years to come of the literary circle which succoured the first generation of Cuban novelists. The opening scene of EL OTRO FRANCISCO takes place in del Monte's salon. Del Monte has invited Suarez y Romero to read his new novel to a visiting Englishman by the name of Richard Madden, an agent of the British Government with a commission to investigate violations of the treaty between Britain and Spain on the suppression of the slave trade. The members of del Monte's circle were liberal intellectuals opposed to slavery and in favour of social reform: Francisco is the first anti-slavery novel written in Cuba. The image of the slave which the novel presents is a romantic one - the film is called THE OTHER FRANCISCO because it sets out to show what the suffering hero, the slave Francisco, might have been like, what kind of life he would really have led, had he been an historical figure. But the members of del Monte's salon were neither unworldly, nor unversed in the realities. Between the scenes in the film which narrate the novel and reconstruct it to show the contrast between romantic fiction and historical reality, we are shown the progress of Madden's investigations (the different strands come together in a brilliantly imaginative stroke, when Madden, travelling round the island, visits a plantation where he meets the characters in the novel). In one of these scenes, Madden is conversing with del Monte:

Madden: Tell me, del Monte, how many whites and blacks are there on the island?

del Monte: 300,000 whites and 500,000 coloured; 250,000 of them slaves.

Madden: Will abolition have an effect on the sugar industry?

del Monte: Well, so far the slaves are necessary, but with the process of mechanisation, importing new ones will go against progress.

Madden: If the problem were in your hands, what would be your solution?

del Monte: In the first place, the immediate end of the slave trade. Then, the gradual elimination of slavery.

Madden: How do the enlightened white creoles look upon Independence?

del Monte: Any utterance in favour of Independence involves the end of slavery. Right now it would earn us the hatred of the white population...Remember that here even the poorest families have slaves.

Madden: Does Spain have the power to suppress the slave trade on the island?

del Monte: More than sufficient.

Madden: And the desire to do so?

del Monte: None whatsoever.

Madden: Then, it's fear of the blacks that holds back pro-independence feeling?

del Monte: Yes, that's the fear.

EL OTRO FRANCISCO, on which Alea and Garcia Espinosa collaborated with the director and Hector Veitia in writing the script, is (as we saw earlier) a piece of deconstruction that has been worked upon its source, a romantic abolitionist novel of 1938; not a free adaptation, but the product of a careful critical operation. The North American film theorist Julianne Burton puts this film forward, along with GIRON and DE CIERTA MANERA, as a paradigm of the subversion of the dominant phenomenon of cinema as spectacle. GIRON 'simultaneously imitates and subverts the blood-and-guts war movie'; DE CIERTA MANERA 'subverts the Hollywood romance'; and EL OTRO FRANCISCO 'critiques the historical melodrama.' RANCHEADOR is similarly based on a literary source, Diario de un Rancheador (Diary of a Rancher) by Cirilo Villaverde (who also wrote the much better known Cecilia Valdes on which Humberto Solas based his epic, but less than successful, CECILIA of 1983). Villaverde, in turn, based his novel on the diary of a certain Francisco Estevez, a hunter of runaway slaves in the pay of the landowners. The film adopts a different aesthetic strategy. Cast in the form of an orthodox but ingeniously crafted narrative, RANCHEADOR pictures Estevez as one of the bloodies and most ambitious of mercenaries. He not only hunts down slaves in their palenques, hidden communities in the hills, but he employs his henchmen in repressing outbursts of rebellion black or white, slave or free. His behaviour threatens to expose the manoeuvres of the sugar landowners who employ him, in their factional conflicts with the smallholding coffee growers. He tries to vindicate himself by setting out to hunt for the legendary woman leader of the runaway slaves, Melchora. But Melchora is a mythological personage, a symbol to the slaves of their freedom, a psychological weapon of combat. In his blind and obsessional fury Estevez commits a series of crimes that begin to contradict the class interests which he serves, and his employers, ever ready to sacrifice their bloodiest servants when necessary, abandon him to his destruction. Though it undoubtedly has elements in it of an epic western, this is actually much less of a genre movie than this description makes it sound, first because of the dialectical analysis of the historical forces involved, and secondly because of the potent Afro-Cuban symbolism of the myth of Melchora and its effect, among other things, in dissolving the individualism of the story's heroes into the collective.

This is also a strategy adopted in MALUALA, which deals with the least documented area of the history of slavery. The film's title is the name of a palenque, or settlement of escaped slaves, one of a group of such settlements somewhere in the Eastern, mountainous part of the island, though exact time and place remain unspecified. The story describes how the Spanish set out to divide the leaders of the palenques against each other, with considerable but not total success. The three films of the trilogy taken together show a development of consciousness from singular to collective, from individual resistance to collective struggle, from suicide to battle. Combining professional and non-professional actors, and with music by Sergio Vitier, MALUALA shared top prize for fiction at the first Havana international film festival in 1979 with the Brazilian Geraldo Sarno's CORONEL DELMIRO GOUVEIA.

From Michael Chanan, THE CUBAN IMAGE, Cinema and Cultural Politics in Cuba (B.F.I.)

NATIONAL FILM THEATRE PROGRAMME NOTES

C U B A S I !

25 YEARS OF CUBAN CINEMA

SERGIO GIRAL'S SLAVERY TRILOGY:

THE OTHER FRANCISCO (1974) Shown at the NFT on 23 September 1985

SLAVE HUNTER (Aka The Rancher)

(Rancheador)

Producer:	Sergio San Pedro
Director:	Sergio Giral
Screenplay:	Sergio Giral, Jorge Sotolongo
Based on the story	' <u>Diario de un Rancheador</u> ' by Cirilo Villaverde
Photography:	Raul Rodriguez
Editor:	Nelson Rodriguez
Special Effects:	Roberto Miqueli
Music:	Leo Brouwer
Sound:	Germinal Hernandez

CAST:

Francisco Estevez	Reynaldo Miravelles
Juan Lope	Adolfo Llauro
Mataperros	Samuel Claxton
Morales	Salvador Wood
1976	Cuba ICAIC

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MALUALA

Director:	Sergio Giral
Screenplay:	Jorge Sotolongo, Sergio Giral
Photography:	Raul Rodriguez
Editor:	Roberto Bravo
Music:	Sergio Vitier

CAST: Samuel Claxton, Miguel Navarro, Roberto Blanco, Miguel Gutierrez

1979 Cuba ICAIC

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Sergio Giral was born in Havana in 1937 of a Cuban father and North American mother. He studied in both Cuba and the USA. In 1961 he became involved with the ICAIC (The Cuban Arts Institute) and began making documentaries. Since 1974 he has been a feature director. He has represented Cuban cinema at various international events and festivals.

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