
Countercriticism: Perugorría, the Symbol

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Surely among the frames in film history that we will remember most is that famous hug between the characters David and Diego from the film “Strawberry and Chocolate.” Two men with different backgrounds and disparate ideas of what participation in society is, meet and become friends, against all odds. They find that they have more in common than they think and on that basis they establish a dialogue that’s what leads the film to be a masterful piece in Cuban arts. Jorge Perugorría is one of the architects of this cultural achievement and has just deservedly received the National Film Award. I remember having been in spaces and conferences that he also attended and what emanates from him is freedom and love for arts. Not only because Perugorría evidently has an immense sensitivity, but because he has known how not to stay in the same character, he has reinvented himself many times and at this point he is a kind of epitome of what it means in Cuba to be an actor.

Perugorría could be the repository of the battle for freedom in cinema in recent decades, because in its essence the legacy of great directors like Titón has been present, who was never satisfied with the formal issues of his time and aspired to much more. That passion for the avant-garde that overthrew prejudices and made art a space for the shaping of the best of human beings is the Perugorría school. Beyond the fact that his character Diego became an icon of resistance against the trifles of misunderstanding, it must be recognized that in later films we could always count on a great Jorge Perugorría, capable of sharing with others on screen and establish a pleiad in the history of Cuban cinema. The consecration, the attachment to traditions, but also the breaking of patterns, make this type of aesthetic legacy something inalienable. Ancestry is what distinguishes us as Cubans and what makes up the way we make films. In Perugorría there’s no shame in our attachment to what is ours, our identity, but there’s a search for the universal, for what puts us in the top position as a people.

A few years ago, in drama classes while studying, I learned that the topic of “Strawberry and Chocolate” was not precisely sexuality, but the right of people to think and act without hypocrisy. More than a cinema founded on the basis of the fight against gender prejudices, it’s a proposal where all of us as a people are portrayed. The topic of freedom and sovereignty as a country takes shape in individual questions and is proven concretely through the sharp dialogue of the characters. Contrasting visions of the world end up finding an middle ground where there are no such differences, but rather a meeting based on common interests. Perhaps Jorge is at this point a symbol of

the discovery for the Cuban of all these certainties in a single film. Whoever has read Senel Paz's story will see that it speaks precisely about these issues and that beyond the literary essence, the desire floats over the work for Cubans to seek and find a conciliation in which the homeland is in harmony with personal projects.

Looking at the times of material scarcity we live in nowadays, appealing to the values that Perugorría helped building is a beautiful gesture on behalf of Cuban cinema. Not just because the work of an artist is recognized, but to validate the legacy of a person who, although he is in full maturity of creation, has already been struggling for several years for a change of mentality in the understanding of what national cinema is and its role in formative issues of identity. The wisdom of dedicating a space where the contributions of this actor will not be forgotten enters into the many rectifications of our cultural policy that has yet to put on the small screen many of the national productions that remain unreleased in that format. But let's bet on conciliatory spirit that Titón's piece spoke of and that was based on the essence of an era of debates.

When "Strawberry and Chocolate" was released, most of the movie theaters in the country were active and fulfilling their social task. I remember that I was little, but they took me to the screening of the film in Remedios. People's desire to gain access was so great that they broke the windows of one of the cinemas doors. I think that scene occurred in more than one place in Cuba. The film, furthermore, took place on the same island devastated by the economic crisis, by the need for hope and the construction of existential horizons. Hearing about tolerance, respect, values and the importance of Cuba's history was a kind of balm to Cubans at that time, upset by so many problems. It was not about escaping, but rather that art expressed collective pain and also did so in a smart, beautiful, powerful, measured way. After the film was screened throughout the country, there were those who misinterpreted it, and also those who wanted to criticize it for many things, but posterity has had the best judgment.

Now that we need solutions from art, because we have entered a cycle of material scarcity, we find out that Perugorría is being given a well-deserved award. It's time for national cinema to burst with all its force into the spaces that remain still and tell us the needed truths. Time for us to wake up through art and collectively build hope. In that sense we have to interpret the award for this actor. And let no one say that the recognitions don't have a social function, when in reality it's an act of justice towards someone who has made us great as a country and people. Maybe Cuba right now has a national film production that is impoverished by material conditions, but we continue to have human capital, with the spiritual force that accompanies us and that's essentially kind. The values promoted by Cuban cinema are not only those of life and the construction of community space, but also go towards regions unknown to what we wish to be.

We must go back to the core of a Titón who in his "Memories of Underdevelopment" already had the keys to the construction of the society in Cuba with the conflicts that this entails and who in his famous scene of Sergio Corrieri with the spyglass told us about the search for meaning in the midst of the chaos of the revolutionary and the transformative process. This is how cinema is made to affect the processes and not with the escapism of the market. It's not in vain that it was in that area of national cultural production in which the richest debates took place in the last century and the most heated controversies. At this point in the reflection on the National Film Award, it must be said that at present we lack those bouts of ideas that could enrich understanding and that somehow were the drives of the development of cultural policy. Nothing like the debate to determine an essential guideline regarding what's Cuban and what's identity. And politics has to do with the representations of what we are and what we want and not even the great classics of cinema escape from this. If Titón was a teacher of the national school and learned from neorealism, this did not mean that he was going to renounce the conflicts that were typical of a here and now in which the crucial attack was being defined. Therefore, the award to Jorge Perugorría is a reminder that we are much more than the wasteland and the absence, the desolation and the material crisis. It's a return to the greatness of Cuban cinema that brings us the breath of the most valuable and brave.

It's not just an award to celebrate the justice of its award, but an act of faith that one can believe in change and improvement. There's the figure of Diego floating behind that gesture, especially in the scene in which he says that "he won't leave here even if they set him on fire..." A phrase that, despite being vernacular, is still an expression of Cuban identity and attachment to the roots and what's ours. A kind of resistance in the midst of chaos that establishes order and that projects a ray of hope on the creation of spaces for art within the spectrum of public debate. In a documentary called "Heresy will never be easy" that came out a few years ago, several filmmakers and personalities linked to cinema spoke of their pain and patient waits regarding creation. It was a fair image of what the Cuban creative space was like in other crises that hit us. Perhaps we will have to revisit those archives to bring the teachings to the present. In any case, Perugorría belongs to that world of the greats that perhaps we are missing.

Shifting into other debates that already extend too long and that have not contributed to us, those of us who love cinema demand that people speak again in the same tone as "Strawberry and Chocolate" and that people entrust their moments of anguish to being able to enter a projection room. I know the aspirations are utopian at the moment, but if we don't believe in art we can't save it. Ultimately, Diego's spirit is that, when we look at his altar full of national references, from Tula to Lezama Lima, with Servando's paintings around the living room. Sergio follows suit when he raises the spyglass towards the American eagle on Malecón Avenue and does not see it since the social and political storm had thrown it into free fall. In all these gestures there's a freedom and an existentialism that does not remain silent, but rather has commotion and change as drives of the event. Cinema represents us, challenges us and is a kind of key within the labyrinth of the most complex issues. People are able to understand politics when they watch a movie, but not by reading a theoretical essay. That's why Diego is important, but even more so the actor who defended said role and who even in the midst of successive crises accompanies us.

Congratulations on the award, it's a flash of sanity that is good for us as a country and that places the eloquence of culture on the right side of history. More than that, it illuminates the path for us and constitutes a footprint we must save. Jorge Perugorría is a heritage that already transcends his person, it's a symbol.

Translated by Amilkal Labañino / CubaSí Translation Staff
