

Remembering Titón

Michael Chanan

IN almost four decades of Cuban cinema, since the Revolution created a film industry where previously there had only been a sporadic succession of individual films, no director has been as self-consistent an author as **Tomás Gutiérrez Alea**, yet no director conforms less to the conventional notion of what a cinematic author is. Titón (his lifelong nickname) was not to be associated with any particular genre, but encompassed many. He did, however, have a special bent for satire, both dramatic, in *La última cena*, and comic, in *Las doce sillas*, *Muerte de un burocrata*, *Los Sobrevivientes* and *Guantanamera*. He is not, however, associated with any particular stylistic tendency, for again he was master of many. Nevertheless, all his films are shot through with an intense quality of documentary reality: he never forgot the lessons about neorealism that were taught at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome where he studied film at the start of the 50s. From the imperfect achievement of his first feature, *Historias de la Revolución*, by way of contemporary reality in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* and *Hasta cierto punto*, of historical reality in *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* and *La última cena*, to the comic but disconcerting vision of his last film, *Guantanamera*, the stories he tells belong in a social world in which the camera, like the protagonists, is enveloped.



A scene from *Memorias del subdesarrollo*. Alea, in the centre facing the camera, plays an unnamed film director. Behind him is Julio García Espinosa.

Shooting *Memorias del subdesarrollo* .. On the left, the cinematographer, Ramón Suárez, hidden behind the camera. Next to him, Titón. At the typewriter, Sergio Corrieri as Sergio.



Above all, his films were not, like say Hitchcock or Antonioni, a steady progression towards total mastery which eventually plays itself out. His last two films, *Fresa y chocolate* and *Guantanamera*, are original artistic creations which at the same time break new ground, and are also quite different from each other in ways which evoke,

but do not repeat, earlier films (like *Memorias del subdesarrollo* and *Muerte de un burocrata*).

The idea of the author in cinema is a slippery one. It was originated after the Second World War by the French New Wave directors - the same generation as Titón - before they became directors, when they were militant young film critics, in order to reclaim for their own the Hollywood film makers whom they most admired. They are not just, they said, craftsmen of commercial entertainment genres, they had the same concerns as the literary author, the same right to serious consideration. Others responded that it wasn't always the director who was the author of the film in this sense, it might be the cinematographer, or the scriptwriter, or maybe the producer, or else a combination of them - after all cinema is a collaborative art. Yet others pointed out that it might also be the producer in the industrial sense - not the individual but the studio. Actually, all these variations on the theme of authorship are relevant to Titón's case - he shared his authorship gladly with his collaborators, and was happy that this included the Cuban film institute, ICAIC, which he saw not as an impersonal production house which happened to be his employer but an artistic community to which he owed the very possibility of making his own films.

Nor did he regard the political nature of cinema in Cuba, with the complex demands this makes on the individual, as an unwelcome element in this equation. On the contrary, Titón was a deeply political being who not only embraced the political domain but turned the camera on the very problems in which he felt himself to be immersed (implicitly in *Memorias*, explicitly in *Hasta cierto punto*, where the protagonists are film makers). To do this and get away with it, you need detachment - otherwise the viewer is likely to smell insincerity - and this is the key to both Titón's aesthetics and his politics. In other words, his aesthetics leaned towards humour, reason and objectivity. while his politics were those of a committed but independent spirit. Neither emotive self-expression, nor the mere emotional experience of the viewer, was ever for Titón an end in itself - for Titón, emotion without intelligence was anathema. His films are like the writings of a contemporary historian who does not know the outcome of the history he is writing but constantly delves back into the past in order to try and understand its nature. And who then sees in his vision of the past, an allegory of what things have become.



A photograph seen briefly in *Memorias* : a line of men, apparently prisoners, standing against a wall in front of the camera. The second from the right is Titón. The photo dates from the late 50s, the men were indeed under arrest, but some of them, including Titón, were released without charges.

It was such a film, *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios*, the furthest back in historical reconstruction that has been undertaken by any Cuban film, which gave me the idea

that I proposed to him in 1982, which he thought about for a year, and then decided that yes, it was for him: an adaptation of Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, which would be turned inside out and told from the point of view of Caliban, Prospero's slave and the first black character in the history of English theatre. To follow Woody Allen's advice, that you have to have more than an idea for a film, you have to have a concept, we decided that the film, to be called *Caliban*, would be a historical costume drama shot on a tropical island, Cuba, but in English, with English and Caribbean actors. And we almost got to make it too!

We had obtained joint support for script development from Channel Four in London and ICAIC in Cuba, and then found an independent European producer - a Norwegian - who was ready to put up what we needed to make up the budget (which worked out in sterling to £1.5m, or around \$2.6m at the time). An English colleague, Holly Aylett, joined me to produce the film. I went to Havana in mid-1984 to write the script with Titón and the playwright Eugenio Hernandez. We quickly agreed on the outline. We analysed both the play and Aimé Césaire's twentieth century version and decided that in our case, Caliban and Ariel would both be black, and they would meet - which they never do in the original - and argue about the best way to deal with Prospero, their master and oppressor. There were two or three other elements in the adaptation. First, we would replace the masque of the original, which instead of drawing on characters taken from Latin mythology, became a convocation of the gods of the Island, which in this version means the Afro-Cuban mythology of Yoruba origin. This scene was written by Eugenio in Spanish, and gave me hell trying to translate it. The dialogue between Caliban and Ariel, on the other hand, was written in contemporary Caribbean English. This let me off the hook in the face of the enormous difficulty of writing contemporary speech to fit around the poetry of Shakespeare, but as I also told Titón, I had recently seen Shakespearean productions in England in which black actors spoke the verse in a Caribbean lilt, and it sounded wonderful. We agreed that it would be the music of the actors' speech that would carry the film across the gap between Shakespeare's language and ours. To prepare myself for this enormous task, I spent a week immersed in the poems of Linton Kwesi Johnson and others. I then had the benefit of advice from George Lamming, who was happily on a visit to Cuba, and kindly went through the script with me.

We also sought to keep the ending open by having alternative and parallel conclusions. There was a problem here: you cannot not end on Prospero's final speech. We thought it might work if we transported him to present day Cuba and he delivered it walking along the Malecón, but Titón wasn't quite sure.

The key, as Titón put it, was that our Caliban was not a monster, but a human being, which meant that the true monster was Prospero, who enslaved him. From the very beginning, Titón was very clear about the enormous sense of malevolence which an actor needed in order to play the part as he saw it, but his first choice surprised me: Michael Caine. I had to tell him it was impossible. Caine is a political reactionary who lives in Los Angeles and would cost millions. Taking the point without demur, he immediately came up instead with the name of Robert de Niro. De Niro, who obligingly turned up on a trip to London and expressed polite interest. He never actually said no, and we knew his agreement would solve all our financial problems, because who wouldn't stump up the cash to have him play a character out of Shakespeare?

When we decided we couldn't wait for his decision any longer, Titón paid a memorable visit to London to begin serious casting, when among the actors we were considering for the part of Prospero, he met Anthony Hopkins, Steven Berkoff and Jonathan Price. And then the project fell through. Our backer had also put up half the money for Hugh Hudson's epic *Revolution*, produced by David Puttnam's company Goldcrest, which had taken upon its shoulders the renaissance of British cinema. When Hudson's picture went over budget - by fully three times the amount we needed for *Caliban* - it not only contributed to Goldcrest's subsequent downfall when the film flopped, but our backer pulled out. At such a late stage, no-one else could be found to step in. Film financiers are suspicious bastards.

We also planned, at the beginning of the film, a short documentary sequence which recounted the origins of Shakespeare's play: how he turned for the first time to a contemporary source, and drew on the first-hand accounts of people he knew involved in financing Sir Walter Raleigh's first voyage of exploration to Virginia, which ended in disaster when some of the ships were wrecked in the Bermudas ('the sweet-vexed Bermoothes' in the play); we would also mention the historical evidence that some of the crew on the ships were black Africans. To gather ideas for this sequence we took a trip to Stratford-upon-Avon, passing through Oxford on the way back, which Titón enjoyed enormously. On this trip he had the idea for this opening sequence of a little piece of self-satire: like the opening of *Muerte de un burocrata*, we would show the manufacture of Shakespeare busts and other touristic knick-knacks.

I do not remember talking about it, but it was clear to me that we had a shared vision of a kind of Brechtian cinema. Despite the appearance of a costume piece, it was conceived in the spirit of Brecht's own rewriting of Shakespeare combined with Jan Kott's idea of 'Shakespeare, Our Contemporary'. What we did talk about a lot was the music, which was obviously critical. We agreed we didn't want to use the original settings of the songs nor anything that smacked of soupy violins and sentimentality; and of course Titón just laughed at the record I played him of incidental music for the play written by the English Victorian composer Sullivan. I was delighted when he was much taken by the music of one of our leading British composers, Peter Maxwell Davies, who had once generously written some music for a short campaign documentary I had made more than ten years earlier. I asked if it would interest him and he said in theory yes, but his diary was full with commissions for at least two years. The question of a composer was still wide open when the project collapsed.

Titón took it philosophically. He had no illusions about the degree to which, as a Latin American and a Cuban, the odds were stacked against him. In the same way he was philosophical about the misinterpretations of his work which regularly cropped up, when Andrew Sarris, for example, described him as a dissident - a kind of Cuban Solzhenitsin - for *Memorias del subdesarrollo*; or he was criticised for *La última cena* because it wasn't a contemporary subject; or for not being political when he chose to make a simple love story in *Cartas del parque*. What such critics - left or right as the case may be - would have made of *Caliban* one can only guess.

For Titón, I am sure, one of the enticing prospects of the project was the opportunity to work with leading Anglo-American actors. For the role of Caliban he thought of Harry Belafonte, whom he knew quite well, or Howard Rollins, who he

seen in Milos Forman's *Ragtime*, a film he greatly admired. Of the actors we started seeing in England, his preferred Prospero was Anthony Hopkins (though he turned it down), in whom he envisaged something of the same character that Hopkins brought to the screen a few years later in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Looking back I realize that it was primarily through his conceptualisation of the characters that the film took shape in Titón's mind. Another key decision concerned Miranda. The one thing she would not be was anything like Hollywood's idea of young virginity, and nor would she be an 'English Rose' type. This was to be a girl on the brink of puberty, puzzled and awkward at her discoveries. I realised that Titón did not think in stereotypical characters or situations, any more than he simply told stories, but rather analysed them in the telling. He always sought actors with the complex understanding of character which is needed in order to pull this off, and together with them created some of the most remarkable and memorable characters to be found not just in Cuban but also Latin American cinema: Sergio Corrieri in *Memorias*, José Antonio Rodríguez in *Una pelea cubana...*, Nelson Villagra in *La última cena*, Mirta Ibarra in *Hasta cierto punto*, Jorge Perugorría in *Fresa y chocolate*. I am sure that the power of characters like these is also one of the reasons for the popularity which Titón's films have often enjoyed, some of them abroad as well as in Cuba.

If some of these films were denied such success, it is not necessarily a mark of aesthetic failure but first of all, a certain truth about films and audiences: sometimes one makes the other, but at other times the lines of communication are not so direct. This is inevitable if your aim is to make films about ideas, which is a real constant in Titón's career. The mark of his achievement is that in films like *Memorias*, *La última cena* and *Fresa y chocolate* he not only pulls the audience into a film of ideas on the hook of the central protagonist, but he does this through a character he doesn't actually expect them to like, given the nature of popular social prejudices. Sergio is a white petit bourgeois dilettante in the middle of a popular socialist revolution; the Count in *La última cena* is an imperious land- and slaveowner. Diego in *Strawberry and Chocolate* is slightly different: as a gay intellectual, the problem in this case is with official rather than popular prejudice. In all cases, these characters are so fully and intensely drawn that honest human sympathy sucks the viewer along. Titón uses this trait, which everyone brings with them into the cinema, to make demands on the spectator, to induce them to think as well as surrender to the screen. When I asked him once how come that *Memorias*, a film of enormous narrative sophistication, was such a success with the Cuban audience, which was brought up on Hollywood, he said it was because it had intrigued them. He always made it his habit to go and watch his films in the cinemas anonymously to learn about audiences' responses to them, and by this means, he told me, he discovered that people were going back to see the film a second and third time because it stuck in their minds, and this pulled them back to cinema. This is the kind of cinema we all need.

Titón's cinema is also one of personal exorcism played out through satire. He told me he made *La muerte de un burocrata* because he sometimes used to shake with anger at the stupidities of the new bureaucracy which the Revolution itself had created, and he needed to work it through. Sergio in *Memorias* is obviously his own alter ego, though he always denied it; that is because Sergio was the character he did *not* become, but under other circumstances, might have been. And in his last film,

Guantanamera, the private subject of the film is equally clearly, his own approaching death. But one feels that he chose these subjects within himself because he sensed that they coincided with, or could be brought into parallel with, popular experience. No comment needed on the experience of bureaucratic muddles, except to recount another personal memory. I once went with him on one of his anonymous forays to the cinema to see *La muerte* in La Habana Vieja. He told me that at one of the film's first showings a woman had run out in the middle in tears. Following her to find out what had upset her, he discovered that the joke he thought he had invented - a body which has to be exhumed to recover the man's labour card, so his widow can claim her pension - that this had actually happened.

In *Memorias* the popular interest came from the fact that what intellectuals in Latin America used to call the *desgarramiento*, the rupture, the breakdown of the familiar vocabulary of existence in the face of revolutionary change, that this is not a monopoly of theirs; everyone is confronted with the same problem of the need for the personal reconstruction of values. While in *Fresa y chocolate* and *Guantanamera*, Titón succeeded in articulating the popular experience of the Revolution in the more difficult times of the 1990s. without pulling any punches

There is also a process of aesthetic working-through and exorcism which runs through these films. *Cumbite*, which I know Titón liked the least among his oeuvre, seems to me a kind of farewell to neo-realism, a cool almost anthropological vision of Haiti which in Cuba was hardly possible any longer, because the society was changing so dramatically and rapidly. Half the pleasure of *La muerte* is its homage to American comedy, which has always, of course, constituted a tradition of subversion. But if the country where these events take place is a hilarious mixture of revolutionary Cuba and the Hollywood land of comedy, it is also a Kafkaesque territory. *Memorias* is a film which clearly talks back to the cinema of Titón's own generation in the French New Wave about the dangers of literary self-consciousness; and Edmundo Desnoes, author of the novella on which it was based, significantly called it a 'creative betrayal' of its source.

Una pelea cubana is in dialogue, on a conscious level Titón told me, with the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha. Unwittingly it also addresses the film by Nelson Pereira dos Santos which is the furthest back in historical reconstruction that has been attempted in Brazilian cinema, *Como era gostoso o meu francês*. The two films were shot around the same time, each unknown to the other. Between them they represent by far the most imaginative visualisations of the origins of modern Latin America to be found in Latin American cinema. *La última cena* completes the work on the history of slavery in which Titón was engaged when he collaborated with Sergio Giral on *El Otro Francisco*, bringing it together with his life-long admiration for Buñuel, his black humour and anti-clericalism. Then there was his support for Sara Gómez, first, when he worked together with Julio García Espinosa to complete her film *De cierta manera* when she died during the editing, and then, speaking to it in his own *Hasta cierto punto*. In *Fresa y chocolate*, the dialogue is with the great cinematographer Nestor Almendros, with whom he made amateur films on 8mm in his university days. It is an answer to the Almendros's *Conducta impropia*, a condemnation of the Cuban Communist regime for its treatment of gays, which Titón called 'a piece of socialist realism in reverse, a manipulation of reality in the service of political propaganda'.

This charge is particularly ironic. Titón was never a member of the Party. He believed that the artist should always maintain a distance from power and authority. Almendros, on the other hand, was a Communist turn-coat. The son of an exile from Franco's Spain, when he and Titón worked together as young *tiros*, it was he who was a member of the Communist Youth and who introduced Titón to Marxist politics. Titón always thought it passing strange that Almendros was able in the 50s to obtain a visa for the United States so easily, and was not surprised when I told him that Channel Four declined to buy *Improper Conduct* for television screening because they believed it was funded by the CIA.

In all his films, this sense of dialogue with others is not preconceived and is sometimes only partly conscious, except that Titón knew perfectly well it is always going on, and that this is what the artist's speech is about, for he found himself doing it to himself - making impromptu self-allusions. These self-references are not deliberate, he said when an interviewer drew his attention to the phenomenon, they arise spontaneously, in the same way certain ideas come up in the course of a conversation. The conversation may be with others, or with your own inner voice - the effect is the same.

In *Fresa y chocolate*, the conversation with Almendros was, as Titón admitted, inevitable: Almendros died shortly before the film began shooting, he died of cancer, and Titón had just been diagnosed with the same disease. Then, after the huge effort of shooting, while he was fighting cancer, what was clearly a very demanding film (with the help as co-director, of Juan Carlos Tabío, the most selfless of all Titón's collaborators), the huge success it met with both at home and abroad gave him the chance for one last shot, and in returning to a script he had put aside a couple of years earlier, he seized the moment in order to exorcise his private experience one last time, to joke about death in the teeth of it. If this, once again, requires detachment and a proper sense of proportion, *Guantanamera* (with Tabío again as his co-director) is not about his private death but a death which everyone in Cuba is afraid of going through: the threat of the demise of the socialist dream, which had managed, almost miraculously, to survive the collapse of the Communist states of Eastern Europe, but only at cost of an enormous battering which has hugely alienated the Cuban people from the politics they had earlier so enthusiastically embraced. The reception of the film says a great deal about the mood in Cuba when the film was released a year and a half ago. On the one hand it was attacked by the film critics for unfortunately not achieving the same level of sublimity as *Death of a Bureaucrat*; some of them complained that it was out of date before it was made, citing the scene of illicit dollar trading which didn't happen any more since the dollar had been made a legal currency in the country. What really discomfited them was the image of the silent girl repeated throughout the film like the angel of death, and who is seen, the first time she appears, in front of the revolutionary slogan *Socialismo o Muerte* ('Socialism or Death'), blocking out the second 'm'. On the other hand, *Guantanamera* was a huge popular success, and justifiably so. It is a wistful film but not one of resignation and negativity. The dialogue with death turns into a dialogue with a dream of life: at its heart is a popular legend, speaking of mortality and the vigour of the young, to whom the old must learn to give way, which is at the same time Titón's own farewell to life.



The author with Titón in Havana

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