



Memories of underdevelopment
Director: Tomas Gutierrez Alea
Country: Cuba
Date: 1968



This midweek season is supported by Film Hub North West Central, proud to be part of the BFI Film Audience Network.

A review by Derek Malcolm for *The Guardian* in 2000:

Of all the dozens of films produced in Cuba through Castro's insistence on the importance of the cinema, *Memories of Underdevelopment* is the most sophisticated. So much so, in fact, that those opposed to the revolution tend to call it a magnificent and unrepeatable fluke, produced as it was by a film institute that was virtually a Marxist ministry. Those in favour cherish it as a landmark that avoids almost all of the radical clichés.



The director was Tomas Gutierrez Alea, a middle-class university-educated Cuban who went along with the revolution despite some of the doubts about emerging bureaucratisation displayed by the equally bourgeois protagonist of his film. This is Sergio, a wealthy man who decides to stay behind when his family leaves for the US. The time is 1961 and the film is placed between the exodus after the disastrous Bays of Pigs invasion and the missile crisis of the following year.

The film centres on Sergio's thoughts and experiences as he is confronted by the new reality. He is fundamentally an alienated outsider, scornful of his bourgeois family and friends but also of the naivety of those who believe that everything can suddenly be changed. He continues to live as a rent-collecting property owner and, in his private life, chases women with an almost neurotic fervour.

He is, in fact, the sort of man with whom we can easily identify from our experience of European films and literature. The difference is that he is placed in exceptional circumstances and finds it difficult to understand them. *Memories* is one of the best films ever made about the sceptical individual's place in the march of history.

None of this would have been enough if Alea hadn't constructed his film so richly, and in excitingly cinematic rather than literary terms. Documentary and semi-documentary footage is presented as Sergio would have seen it and the fictional story that goes along with it is very European in its narrative style.

There are even clips from a porno film - there were many made in Cuba under Batista - and Alea himself and the author of the original novel comment on what is going on in Sergio's mind. As one admiring critic has said, "the film insists that what we see is a function of how we believe, and that how we believe is what our history has made of us".

Memories was Alea's fifth film, and probably his most famous, though at least three others received international attention. *Death of a Bureaucrat* was an ironic satire on the way revolutions stiffen into deadly bureaucracies; *The Last Supper* showed how the black slaves of Cuba in the plantation era were reconciled by religion to a life of bondage; and *Strawberry and Chocolate* was a brave and popular film that, despite Castro's disdain for homosexuality, dared to have a stolid party cadre befriended and changed by a gay man.

Alea was clearly no ordinary product of the revolutionary cinema. He died recently of cancer and was honoured by a government he often seemed to criticise - and even more by ordinary Cubans, who flocked to his films.

From: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/feb/10/artsfeatures>

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian* in 2008:

A very dry title for an absolutely tremendous film from 1968 by the Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. This transfixing movie, with its mix of freewheeling dialogue scenes, still photo images and documentary footage, conjures up the uncertain mood of Havana just after the revolution. It is something to put alongside the Soviet classic *Soy Cuba* from 1964, and in fact stars a Cuban actor from that film, Sergio Corrieri gives an outstanding performance as a wealthy idler who long ago allowed his artistic aspirations to wilt. When the Batista regime falls, his family, friends and pampered wife all flee to Miami but for reasons that he cannot quite explain, Sergio stays in the new Cuba, drifting, yet weirdly exhilarated and liberated.

He becomes entangled in an messy affair with a 17-year-old, and ponders the fact that he has become like a decadent plant, with huge leaves and no fruit. Cuba, he now sees, has been "underdeveloped" according to the Marxist analysis, and his tragedy is that he can only dimly understand what part he has played in this, and has no clue as to how his own personal and spiritual underdevelopment might be remedied. And yet it is his viewpoint - alienated, yet shrewd and somehow also innocent - that allows us to see the reality of Cuban life, without dogmatism or wishful thinking. The effect is fascinating. This is a must-see.



From: <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/jul/11/filmandmusic1.filmandmusic21>