

THE CUBAN NEVER-NEVER LAND IN JUAN CARLOS TABIO'S FILM LISTA DE ESPERA/WAITING LIST (2000): POST- COMMUNISM AS SHARED EXPERIENCE

EL CUBANO DE NUNCA JAMÁS EN LA PELÍCULA DE JUAN CARLOS TABIO LISTA DE ESPERA / WAITING LIST (2000): EL POST-COMUNISMO COMO EXPERIENCIA COMPARTIDA

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ABSTRACT

Juan Carlos Tabio's film *Lista de espera* (2000) is a retrospect of the mixed sentiments of the Cubans about their experience after the collapse of the so-called 'real socialism' in Eastern Europe. The need to survive without the heavy subsidies from its former allies has plunged Cuba on the road to economic change, thus restructuring the shape of its socialist society. As a result of a prolonged transition to limited market reforms and alternated periods of liberalisation and tightening of the State control Cuba was caught up in limbo, suspended in what Lydia Chávez calls 'Never-Never land' – in flux of neither pure socialism, nor capitalism. I argue that,

paradoxically, *Lista* is at once an emphatic criticism of bureaucratic socialism and pleading to its compatriots to retain the positive aspects of the Cuban socialist 'collective dream'. The film demonstrates that despite all predictions socialist ideas are not quite 'dead' yet. I posit that *Lista* is in a way a prophetic film, foretelling Latin America's current disillusionment with neo-liberalism and its countries' recent return to more populist social policies. I claim that these political 'mood swings' are comparable to certain events in Russia and Eastern Europe and were provoked by discontent with the effects of globalisation.

KEY WORDS

Autocratic Socialism - Post-Communism - Neo-liberalism - Globalisation

RESUMEN

El film de Juan Carlos Tabío *Lista de Espera* (2000), es una retrospectiva de los sentimientos mezclados de los cubanos a cerca de sus experiencias después del colapso de lo que ellos llaman "socialismo real" en la Europa del Este. La necesidad de sobrevivir sin las fuertes subvenciones de sus antiguos aliados ha sumido a Cuba en el camino del cambio económico, por lo tanto, a la reestructuración de la forma de su sociedad socialista. Como resultado de una prolongada transición a la limitación de las reformas de mercado y con periodos alternados de liberalización y restricción del control del Estado de Cuba, quedó atrapada en el limbo, suspendido en lo que Lydia Chávez llama "El país de Nunca-Nunca Jamás" en el no influjo del socialismo ni del capitalismo. Yo sostengo que, paradójicamente, *Lista* es a la vez, una crítica enfática del socialismo burocrático y un escrito a sus compatriotas para mantener los aspectos positivos del "sueño colectivo" cubano-socialista. El film demuestra que a pesar de todas las predicciones, las ideas socialistas todavía no están del todo

muertas. Mantengo que Lista es, en cierto modo, un film profético, prediciendo la actual desilusión de Latinoamérica con el Neoliberalismo y sus países y la reciente vuelta de más políticas sociales populistas. Yo opino que esta política de “cambios de humor” es comparable a ciertos eventos en Rusia y Europa del Este y fueron provocados por el descontento con los efectos de la globalización.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Socialismo Autocrático - Post-Comunismo - Neo-liberalismo - Globalización

TEXTO

Themes

Paradoxically, Juan Carlos Tabío's film *Lista de espera* (2000) (From now on I shall refer to the film as *Lista*) is at once an emphatic criticism of bureaucratic socialism and a plea to his compatriots to retain the positive aspects of the Cuban socialist 'collective dream'. The film demonstrates that despite all predictions socialist ideas are still popular in Latin America. I posit that *Lista* is in a way a prophetic film, foretelling Latin America's current disillusionment with neo-liberalism and its countries' recent return to leftist social policies. I argue that these political 'mood swings' are comparable to certain events in Russia and Eastern Europe and were provoked by discontent with the effects of globalisation that have triggered further rifts and polarisation in society, causing the distraction of traditional ways of life and the displacement of millions of people around the globe. I shall be analysing *Lista* in

the light of this socio-political context, comparing it briefly with the Russian film *Okno v Parizh/Window to Paris* (1993).

The carnivalesque trend

Since the late 1980s, there has been a resurgence of carnivalesque comedies and satires in Cuban cinema. According to the Bakhtinian theory of the carnivalesque, such works are usually complex, multilayered, polyphonic films, evolving around paradox and irony. According to Kristeva (1980, see bibliography), they represent the dialogic interaction between opposing ideologies in society. Carlos Tabío's films are amongst the most representative of the trend, particular his *Plaff* (1988), which actually was the first film of this kind in the late 1980s. His later films of the same trend are *El elefante y la bicicleta* (1995), *Guantanamera* (1996) and *Lista de espera* (2000). *Lista* is based on a 1995 story by the Colombian Arturo Arango, who co-wrote the script with Carlos Tabío, together with Sényel Paz (on whose original story another famous Tabío film *Fresa y chocolate* (From now on I shall refer to the film as *Fresa*) ,1993, was based; this was co-directed with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and became one of Cuba's most widely disputed films). *Plaff*, *Fresa* and *Guantanamera* (the latter two co-directed with Gutiérrez Alea) are amongst the most controversial films in Cuban cinema, critical as they are of Castro's regime, challenging the limits of what was permitted by the State at the time.

Socio-political and cultural context

Lista deals with questions such as: 'How to cope with the daily pressures of surviving in today's Cuba'; 'What it means to be Cuban in a country with a mixed economy'; and 'the fragile relationship between humanity's real and imaginary constructs' (Based on Scott Forsyth, *CineAction*, N54, Jan 2001. p.71). Juan Carlos

Tabio's *Lista* is a retrospective of the mixed sentiments of the Cubans after the collapse of the so-called 'real socialism' in Eastern Europe. As noted by Chanan (2004: 444), Gorbachev's perestroika (usually translated as restructuring) (The term stands for Mikhail Gorbachev's period of reforms in Soviet Russia, during the 1985-1989. Gorbachev rejected the Stalinist's legacy of autocratic socialism and advocated a return to the original ideas of Marxism and Leninism) began to destabilize the Cuban economy long before Castro declared the "Special Period in Times of Peace" in September 1990 – a series of contingency plans, originally conceived as a response to conditions of war, introducing new austerity measures and rationing to meet the rapidly deteriorating economic conditions in the country (Pérez, L. A. 2006:⁸ 293). Since its introduction the Cubans have endured a prolonged period of extreme shortages and hardship. Just as for the Russians, this was a very traumatic, almost apocalyptic experience after the collapse of "the beautiful dream of socialism" (Chanan2004: 447).

Similarly the Cubans lost their country's international standing and support (in the 1980s they had the status of a mini-super power in Africa, for example). The need to survive without the heavy subsidies from its former allies has plunged Cuba on the road to economic change, thus restructuring the shape of its socialist society. Cuba seemed caught up in a limbo, suspended in what Lydia Chávez calls 'Never-Never land' – in flux of neither pure socialism nor capitalism, as a result of a prolonged transition to limited market reforms and alternating periods of liberalisation and the tightening of State control (2005: 1-17).

The film is dedicated to Titón (Tomás Gutiérrez. Alea) – revolutionary Cuba's foremost, highly respected and influential filmmaker. Because of the prohibition of official political opposition, and thanks to Alea's firm position that true revolutionary films should be uncompromising and complex, film became the space for public

debate and critical negotiations with the State (see Michael Chanan 2004; and, particularly, Sujatha Fernandes on the emergence of critical and counter-hegemonic discourses in Cuban cinema 2006). In an interview with Forsyth, Carlos Tabío acknowledges Alea's influence in his attempts 'to give an image of reality that is the most complex and provocative possible' (Forsyth 2001: 72).

Storyline, analysis and symbolism

The action in *Lista* supposedly takes place in 1993 – the hardest year for Cuba's devastated socialist economy, when there were shortages of every kind – from petrol to food. In *Lista*, a number of passengers are stuck at a bus station outside of a town in the middle of the island. There is only one bus, which, on alternative days, leaves either to Santiago, to the East of the island, symbolising the path to socialism or to Havana, representing the road to capitalism and the West. Arguably, this also stands for the cyclical notion of the 'political swings' in Cuba: firstly, of the limited market reforms between 1993–1997, followed by the subsequent tightening of the State's grip. Traditionally, since Solás's *Lucia* (1968), the capital is considered a place of decadence, when the countryside stands for real, 'socialist' values. The bus is long past its normal lifespan and finally collapses in smoke. Undoubtedly, the bus is a metaphor for the dire state of the country and its ruined economy. Even the inventive, hardworking bus station manager, Fernandez, has no choice but to declare the bus beyond repair, sending everybody home. Under the initiative of a young engineer, Emilio (Vladimir Cruz), however, a few passengers decide to stay and mend the bus themselves. This represents the view that Cuba should seek its own solutions to the crisis, which, actually, coincides with the official line. It is important to remember that some of the achievements of the revolution made many Cubans proud of their country for the first time in their history (for example, Cuba's first-class healthcare, which in the Americas is rivalled only by that of the USA).

Therefore, for years, this secured unprecedented, continuous national and international support for Castro's government. The group that stays behind decides also to redecorate the station, make further improvements and make it habitable. Soon, there are strong attachments formed, many of a romantic nature. People discover the pleasure of working together, of sharing whatever little they have, and of having common causes for celebration or sorrow. The passengers create such an idyllic community that, in the end, they become reluctant to leave it. When the opportunity arises, even the conman, Rolando (Jorge Perugorría), who was pretending to be blind in order to enjoy some privileges, repents and asks to stay. One morning, though, the passengers wake up to encounter reality — this has been only a 'beautiful dream' which, somehow, most of them have shared (this is a magic realist element representing the effects of Cuba's socialist experiment). Eventually, reluctantly, they have to leave. Some follow their original path to Havana, whilst others, under the influence of the 'common dream', decide to stay or go to the East instead. Rolando, the former blind man, for example, is one of them. He also alters his behaviour, for once joining the endless queues like everybody else, in solidarity with his fellow countrymen. The somewhat ambiguous end implies that he is not the only one deeply affected by the 'common (utopian) dream'. While Emilio is mending the water supply at a stop on the way to Santiago, he hears, yet again, the voice of his beloved Jacqueline (Thaimi Alvariño), asking 'Who is the last in the queue?'. Thus, the story begins and ends in a bus station; however, this time the pair meets on the way to Santiago, and, following the 'magic realist logic' of the story, both must be heading then to Santiago, to the East. According to this reading, the end implies that Jacqueline, who is literally the woman of Emilio's dreams, has decided, thanks to their 'shared dream', to follow her heart and go to the East with Emilio, instead of leaving for Spain with her fiancé.

The ambiguity of the ending

Stone, on the other hand, argues that the ending is rather ambiguous, and what follows is yet another repetition of the same or a similar scenario. Of course, various readings are possible; however, I argue that such an obvious and, paradoxically, most 'unrealistic' ending is the most pertinent and desirable outcome for such a 'magical' story. This may prompt people to call *Lista* a nostalgic daydream yet, who knows what may happen tomorrow in Cuba or in Latin America for that matter? Stone argues that the film is 'a tale of an antiauthoritarian popular cultural strategy that incorporates satire and parody to deflate the dogmatism of the official language and ideology of Castro's Cuba and institute a popular, collective, learning process in its place' (Stone 2007: 144). In the film, the passengers reject and ridicule a dogmatic party official, who goes to a great length to prevent them using their own initiative to mend the bus. Obviously, the bureaucrat represents the negative aspects of socialism or rather of authoritarian socialism.

Cuba at a Cross-roads/a Cuban Third Way

The film advocates a search for a Cuban solution to the island's problems that sounds similar to Gorbachev's perestroika or a Third Way strategy. Gorbachev wanted to rebuild Soviet Russia and create a truly democratic, non-dogmatic, communist society. Instead, however, perestroika and particularly glasnost (often translated as transparency) (Glasnost exposed the crimes committed in the name of Stalin and the negative aspects of this kind of bureaucratic, autocratic socialism, also known as Stalinism. Stalinism was very influential, mimicked widely by the former socialist leaders, thus, becoming the common form of socialist governing. Therefore, later, rather ironically, was referred to as 'real socialism') completely undermined the belief in the socialist system, taking Russia on the road to a mafia-type of capitalism.

This must have been one of Tabío's greatest concerns, as he was trying to warn his compatriots about the ugly face of capitalism. Therefore, there is a character in *Lista* that epitomizes Cuba's emerging capitalist realities. Without doubt, he symbolises the worst aspects of capitalism. He is a stereotypical, one-dimensional character, a nameless negative exaggeration and a caricature. Not surprisingly, he is a very fat and rather repulsive man; depicted as lazy, greedy and selfish in the extreme; he is inseparable from (and defined by) his enormous box, filled with meat and milk, destined for Havana's black market. He is always seen as jeopardizing or exploiting others' efforts, does not take part in any initiatives that involve hard work, greedily helps himself to the common food and hides his own provisions from the rest. Therefore, not surprisingly, he is the only one who does not share the 'common dream' (even the party bureaucrat had a share of it, at least, up to a point).

There is ambiguity right from start, even in the title of the film — in Spanish *Lista de espera* could be translated either as *Waiting List* or as *Hoping List*. At the beginning, one of the passengers interrupts a heated discussion over letting the blind man be the first in the queue to Havana, with the following remark: 'After all, is this a socialist, or a capitalist country?'. This is an important question, a question concerning Cuba's future as a country at a cross-roads, torn between two opposing systems and attitudes, asking: 'Which is more important — the community or the individual?'. On the other hand, the question (at least in the film) implies that the new emerging attitudes are rather selfish, ugly and, thus, regrettable. So, right from the start the protagonists are positioned on the border between two economic systems and must resolve the dilemma — whether to start afresh, and build a dogma-free socialist society that promotes solidarity amongst people; according to the underlying logic and style of the film, the other option is a society driven by selfishness and greed. Bureaucratic socialist orthodoxy, however, is firmly rejected. When the indignant party official attempts to avert the people's initiative, threatening with 'retributions',

everyone simply ignores him, even the station manager. Indignant, the party official leaves the station, thus expelling himself from 'the common dream'.

A Cuban microcosm

The bus station is a microcosm of Cuba, as all social types are present – from the government official, impeding the progress of the rest, to the con artist, posing as a blind man, who eventually internalises the socialist ethics, finally working harder than anyone else. As mentioned earlier, the relationship between Emilio and Jacqueline is of particular importance: Emilio is a young engineer who leaves his job in order to work on a farm for more money, whilst Jacqueline is a beautiful, intelligent, professional girl, who is planning to leave the island with her Spanish fiancé. In 'the common dream', Emilio and Jacqueline end up falling in love, form a happy, harmonious unit and initiate many improvements to the station. Thanks to their efforts the station is turned into an idyllic community. Most of the protagonists are memorable, colourful characters. For example, there is a black woman who is deeply religious as well as pro-revolutionary. She has called her son Vladimir Jesus (a comic mix between Vladimir Ilích Lenin and Jesus Christ). She represents black Cuba, which finds no contradiction in following socialism and santería (the Afro-Cuban syncretic religious beliefs) with equal enthusiasm. Except for the two negative characters above-mentioned (one epitomising bureaucratic socialism, the other the worst kind of capitalism), everyone else is represented with great sympathy and appreciation, mixed with friendly, good-natured humour. These feelings of profound admiration for the islanders' endless endurance, patience and inventiveness are expressed through the manager, Fernandez, who stands for the director's alter ego. For example, there is a lonely old woman whose daughter has had the misfortune to leave for Miami only to fall very ill, unable to pay her medical bills. Of course, this would not have happened in socialist Cuba, where healthcare is free. This is a

sobering reminder of the benefits of socialism. As the old woman lives alone, her only pleasure in life is watching television; thus, she is able to observe the similarities between their situation and that of the characters in, what seems to be, Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel*. Lista nods at least twice to parallels between the two films, making a dialogical comment that unlike the representatives of the bourgeoisie in Buñuel's film, who, in a situation similar to theirs, revert to the laws of the jungle; these passengers, mostly proletarians, respond by pulling together. This is how, paradoxically, the film becomes a metaphor for both — the failures and the achievements of socialism. An approval coming from a foreigner, a Spaniard who has lived for over thirty years in Cuba, reassures the Cubans in the station that the solidarity they have achieved is priceless: on his death bed, he pleads with them to preserve and cherish their precious community.

Carnivals of transitions

Rob Stone notes that in *Lista* Cuba is represented as caught up in limbo, in alternating cycles of reality and utopia. I refer to this ambiguous situation as carnivals of transitions like carnivals tend to have a recurring, cyclic nature and to subvert the status quo, turning the official order on its head, highlighting the need for change and renewal in society. The term encapsulates both the socio-political conditions and their formal artistic manifestation; it stands for the paradox of the carnival/transitional periods, when opposing ideologies have equal weight and standing. As noted by Stone, in *Lista* there is 'negotiation between reality and fantasy, between faith and empiricism, minds, and stomachs' (2007: 143). Carnival of transitions helps discuss the ambiguous, side by side existence of two constructs in *Lista* — one realistic, diverse picture of today's Cuba as it is and another utopian, imaginary Cuba as it should or could be.

An allegory of the Cuban dilemma

This is best symbolised by the character of Jacqueline, the young professional woman, torn between two conflicting urges: on the one hand, she is tempted to leave the island with her Spanish fiancé, who, for once, is not the stereotypical coloniser but an understanding and supportive, kind man; on the other hand, she wants to stay in Cuba with Emilio – the young engineer she has just met and built an idyllic life with in the ‘common utopian dream’. As a result, she has fallen in love with him and the dream. As noted by D’Lugo (1993) and Xavier (1999), Latin American, and particularly Cuban filmmakers (since Solás’s Lucia) tend to use female characters metaphorically, as an allegory of the nation’s struggles. Thus, Jacqueline’s character represents the dilemma of many Cubans, who after years of isolation would love to see the wonders of the developed world and yet are neither overwhelmingly critical of nor indifferent to Cuba’s socialist legacy and future.

A socialist nostalgia or disenchantment with globalisation?

Chanan mentions Vladimir Cruz’s (the actor playing the young engineer Emilio) comments on the film ‘we Cubans have turned postponement into an art; we are the inventors of the art of knowing how to wait. What we have constructed, rather than the dream, is the waiting room to the dream’ (2004: 495). Thus, the film starts and ends in the waiting rooms of two different bus stations: the first one – right in the middle of the island; the second – closer to Santiago, to the East. This in itself represents a symbolic shift to the left, regardless of whether Jacqueline’s decides to stay or to go. As an important director, Carlos Tabío is one of the few privileged Cubans who have been able to travel and work abroad. As mentioned earlier, he has been consistently critical of Castro’s regime, often painting a dystopian image of Castro’s Cuba (that was the norm in the 1990s). Therefore, the making of a film that

reminds the Cubans of the advantages of socialism may come as a surprise, yet many filmmakers from the former Eastern block also felt nostalgic about some aspects of life and culture under socialism.

The Ostalgie and Soviet chic

Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) is, probably, the most internationally renown example of this trend, branded as the Ostalgie movement in recent German cinema (the term is a combination of the German for East/Ost and *nostalgie/nostalgia* and stands for films that lament the loss of some aspects of life under socialism, in the former GDR). *Lista*, thus, attests that some Cubans have internalised the positive aspects of socialism and still cherish the dream of a society that stimulates equality and solidarity.

Just like in *Lista*, in many Eastern European films, particularly from the early post-communist period, there is a similar tension between the Local and the Global. One such example is Mamin's *Okno v Parizh/Window to Paris* (1993) (From now on I will refer to the film as *Okno*) where there is tension between traditional Russian humanism and Western style consumerism. Just like *Lista*, *Okno* projects the preoccupations of many Russians with the uncertainty of their country's future and their own private situation in a global world. Like the Russians at the time the Cubans are preoccupied with the brain drain from their country. Thus, *Lista* represents the hope that this process is still reversible, urging the nation to come up with a renewed, common project that can inspire the young people to stay. Similar to Mamin's *Okno v Parizh/ Window to Paris* (1993), *Lista* is a testimony that the changes in Cuba have been characterized by disenchantment not only with the autocratic socialist regime and its dogmatism and cronyisms, but also with the inequalities created by the emerging capitalist economy. As in the post-socialist Eastern European countries, the collapse of socialism was followed by a deep

ideological vacuum and uncertainty about the future of individuals and the State. As in Russia, the prolonged economic hardship triggered crises of identity, undermining identification with the once popular socialist government. Just like many Russians during the period of 1993 – 1994 thousands of Cubans lost faith in the official course and opted to take charge of their own destinies, which resulted in a mass exodus to the Developed world (For example, in 1994, during a period of only few month 33, 000 rafters left for USA (see M. Canan 2004; L.A. Pérez Jr. 2006).

In *Okno* the decision of Nikolai (a talented musician, composer and a popular teacher) to return to St Petersburg in effect reflects an unconscious collective dream from that time, of having the opportunity to travel only to reject personal happiness with a westerner – a dream that revealed common, strong Russian sentiments of injured national pride, the pride of a nation that would not accept its diminished role in European affairs (see Khashamova 2007 on *Okno*). Similarly, *Lista* is hoping that talented people like Jacqueline (who has so much to offer to society) will reconsider, choose to stay and help rebuild the country. Also, like the earlier *Fresa y chocolate*, *Lista* encourages national unity amongst all Cubans, on the island and abroad.

As observed by Michael Chanan:

[A number of Cuban films from the 1990s] share a common theme identified by a recent writer, Désirée Díaz, as the ‘Ulysses syndrome’: the trope of the journey found in these films in a myriad of forms, real, metaphorical, and imagined – migration, departure, return, internal exile, the impossible promise. (2004: 22)

As noted earlier, these films were dystopian images of contemporary Cuba, sceptical about its future. In this respect, *Lista* is the exact opposite – it is an uplifting film, paying homage to the attributes and the achievements of its people, affirming that,

despite the disillusionment with bureaucratic socialism the Cubans will not give up the dream of building a better, more humane society.

Lista as a prophecy

To me, *Lista* is more than nostalgia for Cuba's past. The film captures some Latin American and post-socialist countries' sentiments, for example, the growing scepticism and disillusionment with neo-liberalism and the 'fruits' of globalisation. In this respect the film is actually a prophecy: at the beginning of the millennium Latin American countries, which were amongst the first to adopt neo-liberal policies, began to show fatigue and disillusionment with them, claiming that all they had achieved was an extreme polarisation of society, the destruction of their middle classes and further impoverishment. As a result, there has been a swing to more leftist policies in the region. Recently, even some members of the middle classes in Argentina, Brazil and Chile have expressed the view that the defeat of the left in the late 1960s and the early 1970s by series of fascist coups robbed their nations of the opportunity to have more egalitarian societies (in conversation with Fernando Meirelles and Else Vieira). After the events of the past two years it is no longer easy to foretell what the future holds for Cuba or for the Latin American continent.

In conclusion

Carlos Tabío has affirmed that *Lista* is a 'fable about socialist Cuba, and its future' (Forsyth 2001: 72). The film emphasises the cyclic nature of politics and the enduring appeal of certain 'utopian' models. Evidently, such ideas tend to come back again and again, even if in a slightly altered and reworked fashion. Arguably, the reason for this is that they represent the essence of the most profound human hopes for equality and justice in society.

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