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The Rebirth of Cinderella

By: Enrique Ubieta Gómez / Special for CubaSi

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The controversy is neverending: does art passively reflect reality, that is, those aspects of reality that the author selects—which already confirms his interference—or does it question it, drives it towards the desired place? It could be said that in art, all paths are valid. Even the vilified socialist realism produced some works of art, although its imposition as a method of creation has been unacceptable. But the question is not rhetorical. I want to comment on some aspects of the Cuban soap opera “Renacer”, currently ongoing. I don’t do so as an art critic, but—excuse the pun—as a critical spectator. I risk that the plot will amend for the better in coming chapters, in a subtle way as it should be, some of the topics that I comment on. I hope so.

I will state the issue without further delay: the “guajiritas” who arrive in Havana, by different routes and reasons, don’t see any “better” work option than that of serving in private homes of people with greater economic power. Let’s say it without euphemisms: the most desirable option seems to be that of being or maids. To complete the soap opera scheme of capitalism, the owners are “good people”, the girls aspire to conquer them or the owner himself falls in love with one of them, one of the servants (I use the harshest term) is “almost” part of the family, she loves the owner like a “mother”, although she can be expelled if she commits a fault and another conquers a “yuma” in passing. It should be noted that the soap opera avoids stereotypes that focus on skin color, there are white owners and there’s a black one (and also employees). This is almost an international norm, an act of correction to the not-so-correct daily life, which is assumed today even by the cheapest American films and series, which populate the medieval European courts with kings, princes and nobles of African descent.

But well, I know that in these domestic tasks one earns a little or a lot more (I suppose that the owner of the hostel, heir of the so-called “all-powerful” Montenegro family in the soap opera, does not pay his employees the same as the grocer); that state salaries are low; also that no job in itself is indecent. What in the world functions as the only alternative for poor, uneducated women, here is a job that can be better paid. However, the relationship between “guajiritas”, servants, and bosses is classic in capitalist imagination, which rewrites the Cinderella story over and over again. I suspect that, as in every soap opera, the extreme and sometimes inconceivable passivity and self-denial of Aitana/Odette will finally be rewarded with a good and rich husband; and that the evil with which the aunt manipulates her nieces with unpronounceable names will be punished. Perhaps, these young girls will find other

paths of fulfillment closer to vocational interests they will discover, as seems to happen with the one who already works in the least paid television. In a country that liberated women, and that carries out a crusade to sustain their conquests, the female characters are opaque, cynical, fearful, dependent on the male figure and can be abused or raped with impunity, without protective institutions stepping in.

The “servant-master” relationship is so symbolic with respect to capitalist society that its presentation as “the best of the options” in socialist Cuba is shocking. And although I spoke of better remuneration, it cannot be conceived as such. Where the motivation is only money, there is no room for personal fulfillment, and relationships of convenience predominate. It is not surprising that a young man like Lian, with good feelings, does not dare to study and seeks the shortest path. In the scenes and dialogues of the soap opera there are few signs that guide the viewer about the society in which its protagonists live or about the one we want. We need films, teleplays, soap operas, each from its peculiarities, that shake society, that question its less committed sides. Because yes, there’s another Cuba, which we must save, which pleads to be saved.

I’m not one of those who believes or wishes that the path to capitalism in Cuba is (will be) unstoppable, much less that this is the purpose of the adopted changes. But changes must be accompanied, guided, oriented, and audiovisual fiction (television, cinema, etc.) can and should do so. What’s shown as natural, becomes naturalized. Because the raw materials determine, yes, but not directly, and there are many cases of personal fulfillment, of dedication to collective objectives that are also (but not merely) individual, of dreams realized, of opportunities taken advantage of or not, of possible paths even in the midst of the crisis we live through. The Revolution has not died, but parodying García Márquez, sometimes no one writes to it.

Perhaps someone might object that soap operas are not meant for that. That there are unchallengeable codes for melodrama and well-trodden paths that must be followed. Some of these codes, however, do not respond to a genre, but to a certain society, which is not ours. We do not want to be a normal country, because the normalcy that besieges us today is one of injustice and subordination, of spiritual impoverishment. It’s not about introducing stiff characters or discourses, but rather about infusing the work with a discursive direction, as Brazilian soap operas do, by the way. An example: young Cubans who receive scholarships to study in other countries are often tempted with job offers or fall in love, and do not return. The soap opera, at this point, prefers to promote another solution: it brings the boy (César) back. In addition to his girlfriend, the country also needs him. But then, inexplicably, he is left floating, like a spoiled rich boy, between a failing marriage and his existential doubts. Does he not intend to work, to validate his knowledge? Does he not want to be useful?

The television series *Calendario* demonstrated that it’s possible to take a critical view that supports socialist values, without schemes, but also without fear. This is not an artistic assessment of the work. It’s a personal reflection on the way in which it addresses Cuban society, or one side of it. Art, in its greater or lesser expressions, not only reflects, but also builds up reality.