

Archaeology and prehistory: everybody gets their digs in

The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future
By Riane Eisler
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By Rachel Sternberg

ARCHAEOLOGISTS LIKE TO THINK they are assembling, piece by piece, an objective view of the past. Some pieces, to be sure, can be known with great precision: how a figurine was fashioned, or how rooms within a house were organized. But small, mundane observations such as these have limited appeal. The big picture is what everybody really wants.

That's why archaeologists must use their imaginations, particularly for prehistoric periods. They handle a figurine and imagine the religious beliefs that might have inspired its creation. They stroll through ruined rooms and imagine the social relations of the people who once lived there. It's a fun game but full of cheating, because to argue from the material to the non-material is, quite simply, immaterial.

A different look: And the game turns out to be not so much a jigsaw puzzle as a kaleidoscope. With each rotation, the pieces fall into a new

configuration. What feminist Riane Eisler does in *The Chalice and the Blade* is to give the kaleidoscope an unusually sharp twist.

Eisler argues that there was a time, before written records, when the women and men who inhabited Europe lived together in friendly partnership. Men did not dominate women, nor did women dominate men. Society was egalitarian rather than hierarchical. It was held together by a spirit of cooperation rather than by force. The power of the universe to bring forth new life—a power symbolized by the chalice—was worshipped above all else.

Then warring tribes swept in and destroyed the peace. They imposed their own social system, based on the rule of men over women. The destructive powers of the sword, or blade, were worshipped—and frequently employed. Since then, the history of the world has unfolded in the shadow of violence, culminating in an arms race that threatens to blot out humanity.

Yet the partnership mode of social organization, which Eisler calls "gylany," has reappeared briefly and intermittently over the centuries and brought with it cultural flowering. "Like a plant that refuses to be killed no matter how often it

is crushed or cut back,...gylany has again and again sought to reestablish its place in the sun." Now, it seems, is such a time and our very survival depends on its final success.

A nuclear blade: "Today we stand at another potentially decisive branching point," writes Eisler. "At a time when the lethal power of the Blade—amplified a million-fold by megatons of nuclear warheads—threatens to put an end to all human culture, the new findings about both ancient and modern history reported in *The Chalice and the Blade* do not merely provide a new chapter in the story of our past. Of greatest importance is what this new knowledge tells us about our present and potential fu-

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ture."

Of what does this new knowledge consist? Eisler draws on the recent scholarship of archaeologists, feminist historians, and social scientists whose "chaos" theories emphasize the possibilities of sudden change. Her purpose is to create a grand synthesis, to reinterpret the world, to show that the balance of power between the two halves of humanity—female and male—is fundamental to history.

She starts with prehistory. The evidence for early periods, as I have

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said, does not speak for itself. It's the archaeologists who do the talking, and on the whole these archaeologists have tended to be men. Eisler easily exposes their male-centered interpretative follies, which are many. The eminent Nicolas Platon, for example, is caught suggesting that women in Bronze Age Crete enjoyed high status due to the "absence of men on long sea journeys." Virtually the entire archaeological establishment is caught assuming that prehistoric men ran every show.

Unfortunately, Eisler then proceeds to indulge in similar excesses of free association and sleight of hand—with a vengeance. The chapter on Crete, for example, shows at work the lively imagination on which so many archaeologists depend: "Even the Goddess's famous double axe symbolized the bounteous fruitfulness of the earth. Shaped like the hoe

axes used to clear land for the planting of crops, it was also a stylization of the butterfly, one of the Goddess's symbols of transformation and rebirth."

The long stretch: Written evidence from later periods is stretched back as far as it will go—and farther. An Elam document about a woman bequeathing property to her daughter is made to recall "an earlier time when descent was matrilineal and women were not yet male-controlled." Yet records from 2000 B.C. say nothing about the social realities of, say, 3000 B.C.

Was there ever a time free of male domination and war? Since Eisler needs a precedent for peace and partnership in order to argue for their future viability, she's interpreted ancient myths of lost paradises—Atlantis, the Garden of Eden, and more—as folk memories of a happier epoch characterized by equality at home and harmony at large. Archaeology, alas, can never yield the proofs that Eisler craves, but she seems undismayed. The animal bones found in Kurgan graves provide "further archaeological evidence that there has been not only a radical social shift but a radical ideological shift as well." Still, she's right to challenge everything she does, and her claims of feminine roots for agriculture, pottery, weaving, prophecy, healing, justice and even writing are refreshing, if impossible to prove.

She's on firmer ground when she moves to history. At least there are contemporary documents to work with—documents that reflect social relations far more clearly than pot sherds and old bones can ever do. From ancient Greece to Christian Rome to Europe during the Enlightenment, she reclaims a place for women and tries to show that the more sway women have, the healthier the world.

Yet this leads her to reduce the complex course of Western history to a single underlying cause: gender relations. War is the outcome of the suppression of women. No one has come up with a totally satisfying explanation for World War I, but to say that "Nazi Germany was one of the most violent reactions to the gylanic thrust" seems to be missing other vital points.

She arrives at the present with harsh words for those who remain blind to women's poverty, hunger, and need for reproductive choice, whether in the veiled precincts of Ayatollah Khomeini or the welfare households of America.

What does Eisler give us? A new and hopeful myth intended to inspire the world toward a future free of nuclear threat, environmental destruction, overpopulation and other modern ills. I leave it wishing it were really true. ■

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By Pat Aufderheide

WHEN THE REVOLUTION WAS new, we made a certain kind of film—we went out in the streets for our material," Cuban director Tomas Gutierrez Alea was explaining to a Brazilian journalist at the annual Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana this December.

She had just asked the bombshell question: did the director of the world-renowned *Memories of Underdevelopment* agree with Brazilian critics (who thanks to years of military censorship in the '60s and '70s had only recently seen his life work) that his later work was less interesting than his early work?

"But now that the revolution is institutionalized," he continued, "we have to find new approaches.

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It's not enough to make triumphalist cinema. We need to make movies that reflect the problems we live in as we build this society." Gutierrez Alea was taking a break from shooting nearby on his new film, a period love story from a Gabriel Garcia Marquez script that he described as a film with universal themes.

But the Brazilian journalist's question touched a nerve. Despite some zestful comedies on such subjects as the housing shortage and marriage, recent Cuban work—especially by veteran directors—has been wan. For instance, *A Successful Man*, the latest film from Humberto Solas, who as a wunderkind made the dazzling *Lucia*, is notable primarily for its lush look. Pastor Vega, whose *Portrait of Teresa* rocked Cuba with its portrayal of pervasive machismo, most recently produced a flop with a claustrophobic filmed theater piece. Even *Up to a Certain Point*, Gutierrez Alea's most recent work, while daring in conception—it's a challenge to the pretensions of intellectuals, in the form of a story about a love affair between an intellectual and a worker—is a frail exercise. The film suffered severe and unexplained cuts, and it's impossible to tell what it might have looked like.

Founders and followers: The Cuban film institute also produced few innovative directors in the generation immediately after its founders. Among the young feature directors there's competence on display, but little that evokes the revolutionary aesthetics of the founding generation. Documentary has had incisive moments, in the generation after that of ebullient, antagonistic Santiago Alvarez, but occasional investigative and critical pieces have been more the exception than the rule in recent years.

Filmmakers have historically had



Cuban film and video industries confront the problems of codifying revolutionary changes.

Film doldrums help push Cuba beyond stolid state TV

a standoffish attitude toward television, as well. Television, in Cuba as everywhere else, is a far more politicized medium than film simply because of its mass reach and pervasiveness. It's also been a medium, as everywhere else, that required tighter timetables and lower budgets than filmmaking. In recent years, however, the technical facilities of Cuban television have leapfrogged in capability, making Cuba a top runner among Latin countries for video technology, while the film institute's facilities have barely held their own.

Shakeup: Now, major changes are rocking both Cuban film and television. They directly affect production, can't help but affect the political atmosphere for creative

artists, and promise to open doors to new and more energetic production.

During the last year, Cuba has launched a nationwide "rectification" campaign—a push for higher productivity involving investiga-

tions of bureaucratic sloth, restructuring of state organizations and severe cutbacks in private enterprise experiments.

Rectification, officials repeatedly stress, has nothing to do with the Soviet push toward *glasnost* and

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perestroika; rectification responds to organizational problems "specific to the Cuban economy." But as one Cuban filmmaker said quietly, "*Perestroika* comes to you whether you want it or not."

In the Cuban film institute, "rectification" means a complete reorganizing of the way films are approved and produced. From now on, three leading directors—Gutierrez Alea, Humberto Solas and Manuel Peres—will head separate workshops, and approve scripts themselves rather than sending them to Cultural Ministry official Julio Garcia Espinosa. After the ministry approves a budget, it's up to each workshop to make movies that succeed at the box office and meet quality standards of an internal committee. (Their efforts will be helped along by a new policy where exhibitors will pay more for lower-quality foreign films.)

Each workshop team earns only a basic stipend, and gets a piece of the film's profits. The decision, explained Garcia Espinosa, reflects in part the need to channel the talent of what has become three cliques, in the club-like atmosphere of the Cuban film institute, into three creatively competitive enterprises.

"We're trying to turn cliques into competitive units, to recognize that certain people identify with these leaders and take that fact and turn it into creative energy," Garcia Espinosa said. "Within the revolution, you need to recognize diversity; to guarantee art you have to guarantee diversity. Above all, we have to protect development. The important thing is to create a creative climate out of confrontation."

Self-criticism on the tube: Major changes have also come to Cuban television. There, rectification has resulted in several TV programs that open up public debate. Cuban TV may now hold the promise of a pointed self-critique within state media that film institute newsreels once tried to be.

Points of View features man-in-the-street interviews on problems of daily life, such as "voluntary" work brigades and family problems. *Wide Angle*, a studio talking-heads public affairs show, calls together debaters on international affairs topics.

The most popular program, though, is *On the Screen*, a monthly program that's the *60 Minutes* of Cuban TV. It travels into factories, where workers are interviewed about productivity problems. For instance, in one meat-processing plant, workers harshly indict the level of maintenance, which results in gross inefficiency.

"Everything's all screwed up here," one feisty woman says to the video camera. "It's been two years since we had any repairs here." An older man protests, "We're the ex-