

Interview Christophe Cupelin

By Pablo Suárez, Buenos Aires Herald, 24 October 2012

Among the many notable features screened at this year's edition of the Doc Bs As, a film festival solely devoted to local and international creative documentaries, one title clearly stands out: *Captain Thomas Sankara*, the full length debut of Swiss filmmaker Christophe Cupelin. You are probably wondering who Thomas Sankara was, and it's almost unbelievable that considering the importance of his work and his legacy, his name is not as well known or famous as it should be. But there are reasons for that. In fact, the remarkable documentary by Cupelin gives all the information you need, and even more, to get familiar with so unique a leader – as well as to why he's not remembered.

Captain Thomas Sankara is a portrait comprised of material from the archives of Thomas Sankara, president of Burkina Faso from 1983 until his assassination in 1987. Through his desire to liberate his country and transform his fellow citizens' way of thinking by questioning the world order and challenging the authority of those with power at that time, he made a mark on both African and world history. Even when twenty-five years have passed since he was killed, the mystery over some facts and details around his death still remains. By using a carefully constructed organization of rare archive footage, filmmaker Christophe Cupelin provides a compelling depiction of a man who remained loyal to his principles and his people to the point of dying for them.

Most documentaries that use archive footage tend to be sort of boring and too formulaic, mainly because their main goal is just to convey information in a didactic fashion - and nothing else. But Christophe Cupelin's feature is unlike most documentaries because its goal is not to merely provide facts, events and obvious notions related to Sankara as a politician and a leader. It realizes these expectations, of course, but it goes way beyond them for it also offers a full portrait of Sankara as a human being with both his virtues and flaws. Doubtless, this is one of the reasons why *Captain Thomas Sankara* functions so well. Another reason is how carefully edited it is, so that viewers are taken for a cinematic ride at the right tempo. It never drags and it never goes too fast.

In a recent interview, and within the frame of the Doc Bs As, Christophe Cupelin talked to the *Herald* about the making of his noteworthy opera prima.

What was the departure point for *Captain Thomas Sankara*?

The 20th anniversary of the death of Thomas Sankara was back in 2007, and I realized I was going to be alone in Geneva to think about it, and, of course, commemorate it. However, I learned there was an international commemoration: an artistic project, the Thomas Sankara Caravan, which departed from Mexico, then went across France, Italy, Africa, Senegal, and finally ended in Burkina Faso. When I found out about this project, I realized I wasn't alone in my desire to commemorate the death of Thomas Sankara, and I happily took part in the celebration. I made some short video clips of the Caravan, and then anonymously uploaded them in YouTube. Soon enough, there were over 100,000 hits. That's when I thought I would definitely try to make a movie about him. In fact, I had wanted to make a film about Thomas Sankara ever since the day he was killed. But since he's a taboo character in Burkina Faso itself, I was kind of afraid to get into it.

What was the initial response from potential producers?

Everyone told me: "That's an African issue, we're not interested. Not only it is an African issue, but it's also from the 80's, and about the revolution. We couldn't care less about the revolution". But I didn't pay attention and went on with my idea of making the film. First, I thought of making a conventional documentary: interviews, archive footage, a voice over, a trip to Burkina Faso ... but since I didn't have any financial support, so I decided to use my own archive footage. My first clips were from 1985, when I made my first trip to Burkina Faso, during the revolution. And I also started looking for more archive footage. Also, a great deal of my knowledge of the events that I had thanks to my relationships with many friends of mine that had supported and collaborated with the revolution. I read lots of books and all the news articles I could find. The story I tell is the story everybody tells in Burkina Faso.

In formal terms, *Captain Thomas Sankara* is a somewhat unusual documentary. For instance, take the creative use of color and solarizations in much of the footage.

At the very beginning, I wanted almost the entire film to have different colors and solarizations, diverse shades that would permeate all the archive footage. I wanted it to have a strong impact on viewers. Also, I didn't want them to ever get bored, let alone lose their attention, so I thought color would do the trick. I wanted viewers to be able to remember, some days after seeing the movie, what they had seen, as best as possible. At the same time, it was a way of saying that the story of Thomas Sankara was unbelievable; such a character was so extraordinary that this kind of expressive use of color conveyed his almost surreal nature.

So this was one of your first ideas in terms of film form.

Yes, but at first I thought of using this effect throughout the entire film, but then after seeing the material quite a few times in private screenings, I realized it wasn't necessary to colorize and solarize it all since the protagonist was already important enough. So that meant using the effect to a certain extent, not more than needed. Also, to me this effect is a sort of mask, it enhances his face and figure, and brings out the symbolism masks have in Africa.

From a political point of view, what do you find most remarkable about Sankara?

In the film, Sankara himself says it: the most important thing is that the people have gained self-awareness; they know they exist and who they are. This is very important because this land used to be a French colony. It was a colony, a neo-colony, a post-colony; even after it became independent it was never really independent. The revolution was what gave the country its true independence. The proof lies in the fact that, one year after the revolution, the country changed its name from República del Alto Volta to Burkina Faso, which means “the country of honest men”. The people acquired a new identity. I think that’s the most important thing.

So, what’s the situation like now?

If you were white and went to Africa, it was impossible to have a dialogue on equal terms. But thanks to Sankara, I think that now you can have a talk at the same level. The project Sankara had was not about having discussions with the president in order to have new deals and agreements. The main idea was that the people of Burkina Faso could have a re encounter, a rendez vous with another people from other nations. And I am a son of that project. I have friends there who I met back in 1985. In different ways, we have all collaborated to go on with the project.

What do you find most appealing about Thomas Sankara?

He was someone who accepted and assumed his responsibility, including his mistakes. To me, he’s an intellectual reference since there are many issues that I can now analyze by looking at them from his point of view.

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