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Cuba Libre



Seeing red: the pre-Revolutionary heat of *I Am Cuba's* Havana

By J. Hoberman

I Am Cuba

Directed by Mikhail Kalatozov
Written by Yevgeny Yevtushenko
and Enrique Pineda Barnet
A Milestone Film Release
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There are film fossils for which cine-paleontologists search and film fossils that just miraculously appear. *I Am Cuba* is among the latter—as unexpected a find as a Siberian woolly mammoth preserved beneath the sands of a coconut grove.

Thirty-odd years after its evidently disastrous premiere, Soviet director Mikhail Kalatozov's deliriously stodgy two-hour-and-20-minute paean to the Cuban revolution emerges from the vaults and onto Film Forum's screen. If the film seems a bit stiff and blinking, that's nothing compared to the disorientation it inspires. *I Am Cuba* has the quality of a Communist hallucination.

History barely records that *I Am Cuba* was one of three fraternal projects that the then-fledgling Cuban film institute coproduced with its new Warsaw Pact allies as a means of educating homegrown moviemakers. Two were banal genre pieces: *Prelude 11*, by the intermittently distinguished East German director Kurt Maetzig, was a thriller about CIA-sponsored counterrevolutionaries; *For Whom Havana Dances*, by Czech hack Vladimir Cech, set a story of contemporary Cuba against the picturesque backdrop of Havana's carnival.

I Am Cuba, cowritten by youthful bard Yevgeny Yevtushenko, was less easy to categorize. A throwback to the revolutionary formalism of the 1920s or belated tribute to Sergei Eisenstein's incomplete *Que Viva Mexico*, Kalatozov's sun-struck evocation of life before and during the Cuban revolution was a critical and commercial failure—never shown outside the USSR or Cuba until it surfaced as part of a Kalatozov tribute at the 1992 Telluride Film Festival.

A veteran director and former camera-operator, the Georgian-

born Kalatozov (1903-73) enjoyed a varied career before venturing out into Havana's searing tropical light. His first feature was the experimental, staged-ethnographic doc, *Salt for Svanetia* (1930). He subsequently served as Soviet consul in L.A. during World War II, shored up his credentials with the notorious Cold War melodrama *Conspiracy of the Doomed* (1950), and signaled the post-Stalin "thaw" with a visually expressive World War II romance, *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957). The last marked the beginning of a three-film partnership with virtuoso cameraman Sergei Urusevsky (1908-74), disciple of the Cubo-Futurist painter-photographer-graphic designer and all-around red modernist, Alexander Rodchenko.

Relentlessly visual, *I Am Cuba* employs relatively sparse dialogue in the service of four narrative vignettes, more or less delineating the progress from prerevolutionary despair to armed struggle. The movie opens with a bird's-eye view of pristine beaches and primordial palm trees, the wide-angle lens warping space and elongating natives as the narrator sonorously intones how "Ships took my sugar and left me in tears." Almost immediately, suffering is upstaged by aestheticism. Apparently using a specially constructed external elevator, Urusevsky's camera swoops among Havana's skyscrapers, lands on the deck of a luxury penthouse, pans over a gaggle of bikini-clad jet-setters, and then, still in a single continuous shot, plunges beneath the chlorinated water of the rooftop swimming pool.

Downstairs in the cabaret—designated site of Cuban degradation and American imperialism, here visualized as something out of *La Dolce Vita*—two slick rockers croon a ballad in praise of "loco amor" as American tourists ogle writhing dancer-prostitutes, when not amusing themselves by rendering them in suitably degenerate Picasso-like sketches. Urusevsky films an orgiastic floorshow, treating the nightclub interior like the material of a tatty pull, bobbing and weaving through a foliage of foreground clutter and masklike

faces. For all the contorted performers, the camera is the star.

Throughout, Urusevsky's wildly tilted, mainly handheld, deep-focus, chiaroscuro compositions keep the viewer in a permanent state of vertigo. Some shots feel as if filmed from a hammock, others from a dolly whose tracks are laid across the sky. (The cranes are really flying here.) The second, shorter episode leaves decadent Havana (where even the taxis are Cadillacs) for the countryside—although even a farmer's humble hut offers an arena for Urusevsky's loop-the-loop camerawork.

A dispossessed peasant sends his teenaged children to town (where they spend his last peso swilling Coca-Cola and playing the jukebox), then torches his crop—the camera spinning like a corkscrew through the flaming cane field.

Maintaining the fiery metaphor, while picking up the revolutionary pace, the movie's third and long-

est section returns to Havana. A newsreel of Cuba's pre-Castro dictator Fulgencio Batista is revealed, as the camera tracks back, to be projected on a drive-in screen. A group of student Fidelistas hurl firebombs at the image, setting it aflame. When police shoot a student distributing antigovernment leaflets from a campus balcony, the swirling camera accentuates the trajectory of his fall—shadows of fluttering leaflets caress him as he lies on the pavement. (Topping even this overheated symbolism, a dead dove falls from the sky as other students march toward the waiting firehoses of the police.)

The murder of another student leader provides material for one more visual tour de force—the victim advancing into swirling smoke and spattered by water even as he is gunned down—but the most extraordinary shot is reserved for a funeral procession. As the young martyrs are borne through the nar-

row streets of downtown Havana, the camera ascends over the crowd to a fifth-story loft, observes a group of cigar workers leaving their tables to unfurl a commemorative banner from their window, and then—still in one unbroken take—floats out into space to follow, overhead, the parade of mourners.

Finally, having established the traditional worker-peasant-intellectual triumvirate, *I Am Cuba* visits the rebel stronghold of Oriente Province for a mindrama of revolutionary conversion. A peon family shelters a fugitive Fidelista—although his attempt to raise their consciousness fails until they are subject to gratuitous bombing by Batista's air force.

Saturation bombast is the operative strategy. *I Am Cuba* is a

Film

movie in which drunken American sailors saunter past Havana's illuminated storefronts, declaring themselves "the heroes of old Uncle Sam," while stalwart guerrillas march singing into battle, smiling through the explosions. (When captured and interrogated as to the whereabouts of their leader, the revolutionaries paraphrase *Spartacus* by individually proclaiming, "I am Fidel.") As the narrator informs us in a burst of official bluster, "These are the people about whom legends will be told."

Everything is as true as its pose. History is made with the inevitable monument in mind. Thus, for all its splendid expressionist frenzy, *I Am Cuba* is a formidably static work—memorializing, as if in granite, the hopes, illusions, and hysteria of 1963. At once stirring and stultifying, the movie is as hubristic as its title. *I Am Cuba* petrifies the moment when already moribund Socialist Realism dared to cha-cha-cha. ■