I am Cuba

Director: **Mikhail Kalatozov**
Country: **Russia**
Date: **1964**

A review by Ed Gonzalez for *Slant Magazine:*

From Sergei Eisenstein to Andrei Konchalovsky, Russian filmmakers perfected a formula for manufacturing social reality out of highly concentrated mixes of activist outrage and artistic chutzpah. Political hindsight overshadows their unparalleled toying with film language, but it also deepens great works of art like Aleksandr Dovzhenko's Earth and Mikhail Kalatozov's I Am Cuba. These two enthralling synergies of sight and sound were made with the support of a communist machine that would eventually fail the people of the Soviet Union and Cuba, but they are first and foremost exaltations of the rebel spirit, hurled at audiences with a fierce conviction and belief in cinema as a propagandistic vehicle for change.

For the Soviet Union, I Am Cuba was an opportunity to promote socialism abroad during de-Stalinization in the Khrushchev era, and for Cuba it was a way of staking out a cinematic presence. So it is that the film begins with a survey of the island's topography, the camera evoking a sense of arrival and landing, with the blown-out palm trees and waters suggesting a daguerreotype from some prehistoric past. Is it poetic irony, then, that the film disappeared into the ether? Though the Bolsheviks wanted to give Cubans a Battleship Potempkin to call their own, a celebration of freedom from fascist bourgeois rule, I Am Cuba did not resonate as intended, largely because its hieratic, distinctly Slavic style was not in sync with Cuba's unique cultural and political identity during the height of the revolution.

Flash-forward three decades and I Am Cuba is an acknowledged cinematic masterwork. Today, its dreamy, inimitable style resonates differently for Cubans who once denounced the film (press at the time called it I Am Not Cuba) but who were betrayed by the revolution they took stock in—the same one that made the film possible. I Am Cuba's voluptuous, somewhat idealized sense of observation—some have even called it naïve—now seems to reflect a generation's thwarted political ambitions, almost as if the film were actively cannibalizing itself. "I am Cuba," begins the sarcastic narration by the island herself (voiced by Raquel Revuelta), dryly introducing herself before thanking Columbus for asserting her beauty and bemoaning the sugar-pillaging legacy of his conquest, though she may as well be talking to Fidel or Che.

I Am Cuba is structured around the stories of four characters whose lives assert the diversity of the Cuban populace but also speak to the nature of rebellion. Maria (Luz María Collazo), alias Betty, sells her body to a coldhearted American (Jean Bouisse), bringing him back to her shack outside Havana and introducing us to a Cuban underbelly unseen in the island's tourist-mongering adverts; an old tenant farmer, Pedro (José Gallardo), burns his vast sugarcane field after learning it's been sold to the American company United Fruit; a students' struggle erupts in violence and culminates in a dizzying funeral procession for the morally conflicted Enrique (Raúl García); and a young farmer and pacifist, Alberto (Sergio Corrieri), becomes a guerrilla fighter after his home is bombed and his son is killed by unseen aircrafts.

I Am Cuba's politics are crude and transparent but poetically revealed, as in Pedro's children sipping on Coca-Colas while the old man burns his sugarcane field and Maria/Betty's seduction inside a Havana nightclub by group of Americans. The men are capitalist stick figures, played by foreigners whose words

suggest talking points, but as in much of the film, an interesting dialectic is struck between the literal storytelling and more subjective use of film language, with the phantasmagoric images fiercely taking the pulse of a nation and its people. The flipside to the hobnobbing Havana nightlife, the shantytown where Maria is visited by her fiancée, a fruit seller and undercover revolutionary, is presented in a bold expressionistic style that simultaneously acknowledges the brutality and nobility of underdevelopment. This subversive reflex is also apparent in the film's ki netic nightclub numbers, which are happily consumed by a captive capitalist audience but seethe—in Kalatozov's foregrounding of bamboo, statues, and dark faces—with resentment for a dying cultural identity and a certain thirst for comeuppance.

I Am Cuba is a cinephile's wet dream, a collage of Herculean feats of technical wizardry that would be easy to dismiss if it wasn't so humane. Every vignette in the film hinges on a possession, during which acts of tyranny against body or land provoke moral awakening, and Kalatozov and cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky shrewdly key their densely choreographed aesthetic to the psychological turmoil of their characters. "No estoy cansado!" yells Pedro, chopping down his sugarcane as the camera swings from side to side, absorbing the rage in the old man's arms. Later, the camera moves to the rhythm of an unfurled flag, slipping through a window and hovering above Enrique's funeral procession. The film may or may not have changed the political face of the world, but in the way image and sound conspire to lay down the foundation for a new way of aesthetic thinking, it was at least geared to permanently change the way movies were made. Given its recent resurgence, its dream of a cinematic future may just come to true.

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