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AN AMERICAN QUARTERLY DEVOTED TO RUSSIA PAST AND PRESENT



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FILM REVIEW

I Am Cuba. USSR/Cuba. 1964. Script by Y. Yevtushenko and E. Pineda Barnet. Director, M. Kalatozov. Camera S. Urusevsky. New York: Milestone, 1996. Video \$79.95. LD \$69.95.

I Am Cuba was an important propaganda project of the Soviet Union and Cuba. It was supposed to further the iconography and mythology of the revolutionary aesthetic and become the cinematic cornerstone of the "Cuban craze" prevalent in the Soviet Union during the mid-1960s (as depicted by Boris Frumin's recent film, *Viva Castro*). A special team was commissioned to work on the project. Director Mikhail Kalatozov had made the classic documentary masterpiece, *Salt for Svanetia* (1930), followed by many lesser-known features. Cameraman Sergei Urusevsky studied fine arts under some of the Russian constructivists, and had worked with directors such as Mark Donskoi and Grigorii Chukhrai. In 1957, Kalatozov and Urusevsky worked together for the first time on *The Cranes Are Flying*, the film that returned Soviet cinema to prominence when it received the top award at the 1958 Film Festival at Cannes. They then made *The Unsent Letter* (1960), a romantic story of geologists' quest for diamonds, which was a lesser success.

Yevtushenko, the screenwriter of *I Am Cuba*, was better known as a poet. He had already written his *Khotiat li russkie voiny?* and was a special correspondent to *Pravda*. Enrique Piñeda Barnet, his Cuban counterpart, was a poet as well. The project was preceded by a three-month research trip by the team to Cuba. The group visited places and met with many people; they even held extensive interviews with Fidel himself. The production was lavishly financed. The project employed sixteen Russians and seventy Cubans who often worked seven days a week, and shot over two hundred thousand feet of film. Shooting spanned over twenty months, and *I Am Cuba* was released in 1965.

The film runs close to three hours and consists of four unrelated stories. It is an accounting of the fates of ordinary Cubans and sets up situations of class confrontations that at the end lead them all to revolution. Maria is in love with Pedro but is forced to prostitute herself to the rich Americans to make ends meet. An old man works day and night in the sugar cane fields but is deprived of his livelihood by a single whim of the landowners. A revolutionary student is hesitant to kill an oppressor but is killed by him later that day. A poor family is preparing for their daily routine but becomes a target of an indiscriminate bombing in Sierra Maestra. The stories are brought together by beautiful sequences of luxuriant tropical landscapes, where a female voice providing offscreen commentary, presumably Cuba herself, talks about the rape of her land and the sufferings of her people. There is a glorious ending, however—a rejuvenating, triumphant revolution.

If there is something extraordinary about this film, it is the cinematography. Urusevsky will be remembered as one of the most innovative and resourceful figures in the history of cinematography. The camerawork is influenced by the approaches of another major figure of Soviet cinematography, Eisenstein's cameraman Eduard Tisse, and parallels can be drawn to the footage of the 1932 unfinished *Que Viva Mexico*: the interplay of shadow and light, the indolent and enchanting spirit of the South. To Urusevsky, the powerful emotional impact of contrasting white, black and shadows is crucial in cinema. For *I Am Cuba* he used special infrared stock to achieve the effect of a white island and palms on a dark sea and sky background.

The viewer's experience of 1950s' Cuba is extraordinary. Most of the film was shot with a 9.8-mm lens that slightly distorts proportions and gives the image a dizzy, engulfing feel. Furthermore, it is shot entirely with a hand-held camera. Urusevsky is a virtuoso of the kinetic camera—he dances with it, wanders about space with it, even goes underwater with it. In *I Am Cuba* shots are long and elaborately composed. Many scenes consist of a single take that

runs two minutes and more, making it difficult even for professionals to understand how they were done. In order to make possible the changes of angles and unexpected twists in the point of view, the camera was often handled by two operators. Sometimes even the actors themselves were asked to hold it and shoot their own movements. The nearly three-minute complex opening shot on the hotel roof required seventeen takes and involved around one hundred extras. It included panoramic long-shots and facial close-ups, sweeping vertical and horizontal movements, and ended with the submerging of the camera in a swimming pool for an underwater sequence.

The film was conceived under Khrushchev but released under Brezhnev, and the change in political climate accounted for its lukewarm reception. *I Am Cuba* was intended as a pure propaganda piece, but the excess of artistic innovation led to charges of formalism by the Soviet authorities. In an extensive discussion organized by *Iskusstvo kino* in 1965, various filmmakers and critics shared their admiration for the experiment in cinematic form, but noted that excessive attention to the form had led to neglect of character development and the psychological complexity of the protagonists. The overtly aesthetic approach was considered inappropriate since it had subjugated content to form. It seemed that the cameraman had taken over directing, and was intent on demonstrating the means of expressions he had at his disposal at the expense of the themes these means were supposed to serve. Moreover, the filmmakers had proven indifferent to the fates of people shown in the movie. They had led the viewers to enjoy the beauty of the image instead of feeling sympathy for the sorrows of the downtrodden. Instead of showing the exploitation of the Cuban people the authors were accused of glorifying the Yankees' lifestyle.

Urusevsky was forced to defend himself. "There cannot be art beyond the form," he claimed, alluding to Eisenstein. He admitted that, because the Russians involved in the project felt they did not really know Cuba, they chose to approach it poetically rather than rationally. Thus, the film was to be seen as a visual poem, in which case the content had to yield to imagery. "It has never interested me, as a cameraman, to just register what was going on in front of the camera," Urusevsky claimed. On the contrary, his goal was always to "make the image very active."

I Am Cuba is a remarkable cinematic achievement. Its unique cinematic language, which brought criticism of the film in 1960s Russia, was what brought the film the enthusiastic acclaim it now enjoys in 1990s America. The film was rediscovered at the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1994, and from there began its triumphant revival for U.S. audiences. The American distribution rights were acquired by Milestone, and Martin Scorsese presented it for 35-mm distribution in art houses across the country. It was released on video in 1996, and has enjoyed enthusiastic reviews. Even for the connoisseur with the most sophisticated taste, *I Am Cuba* will offer a rare cinematic treat. Film professors accustomed to using Orson Welles's opening of *Touch of Evil* to illustrate a long, complex single take may soon switch to examples from *I Am Cuba* instead. For the Russian specialists, *I Am Cuba* can serve as a proof that Soviet cinema has yielded masterpieces not only during the 1920s but also in more recent times. This movie is a must-see for everyone who has an appreciation for the cinema.

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