In Flames, Then and Now: I AM CUBA

I AM CUBA lights the screen on fire.

By Glen Helfand October 2, 2015

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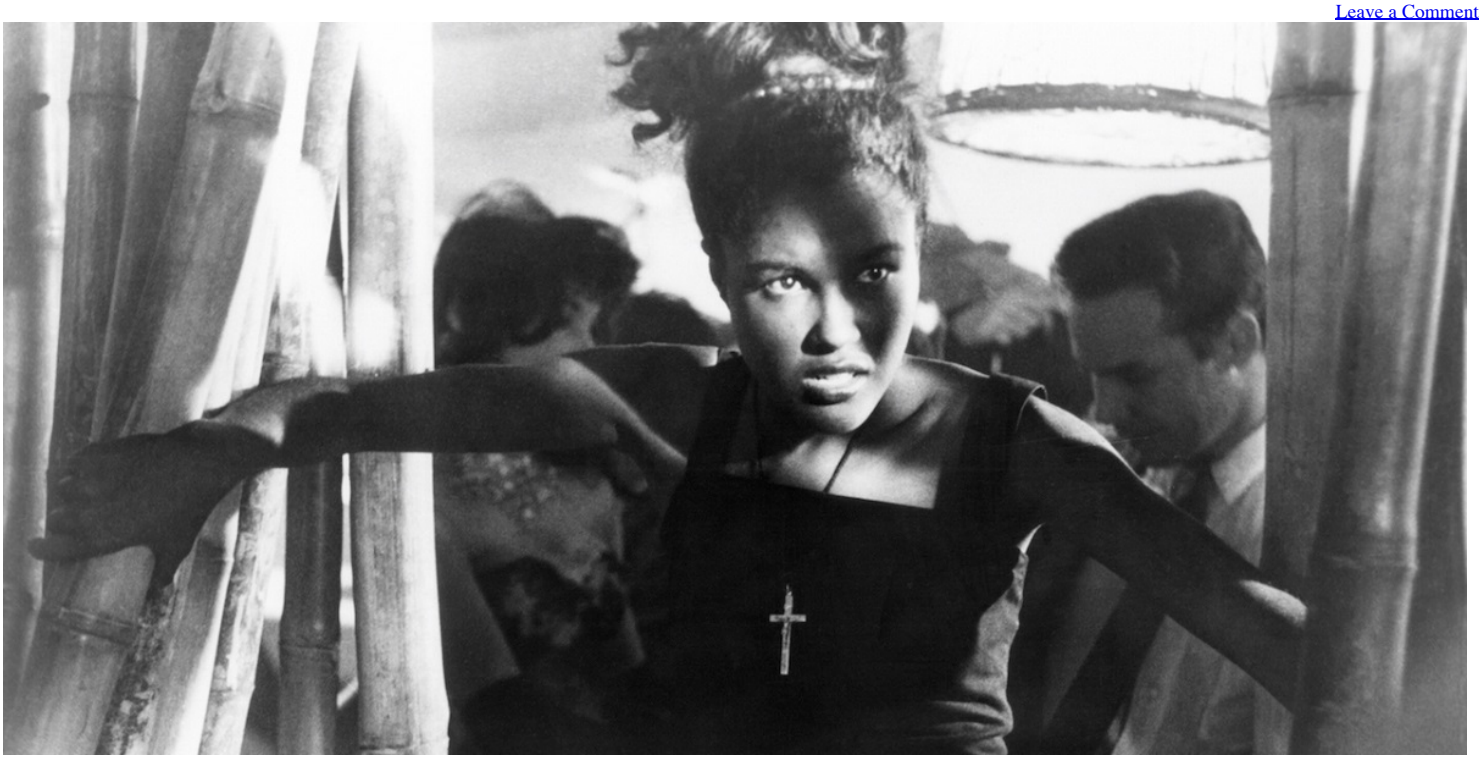

'I Am Cuba'

Cuba, particularly for US citizens who have little access to this nearby country, is a confluence of dreams. Its island confines swirl in the imagination with bucolic island splendor, a history of decadence, communist idealism and heated Cold War conflict. It's also got the sway of a deep musical history, voodoo and faded glories of unkempt architecture. In its early 20th century pre-revolution days, it was a land of corruption and decadence, of sex, gambling and cigars, set to a mambo soundtrack. It's currently on the cusp of political shift, with easing US sanctions that may portend a thriving tourist industry, but also continuing repression of dissenting voices (see the travails of expat artist Tania Bruguera)—all of which point to the real dramatic tensions of a physically tiny country with an out-sized personality.

It's cinematic appeal is undeniable. ***I am Cuba*** is a vivid expression of the island nation's 1950s political turning point. Shot through the lens of its Soviet communist director Mikhail Kalatozov, this cinematic masterpiece was intended as propaganda in support of the Cuban revolution as it transitioned from Batista to Castro. As such, it is a series of atmospheric vignettes that illustrate inequity, exploitation and a sense of triumph over the oppressors. On paper, the film sounds strident and dour, but it is a work that exuberantly marshals the dreamlike power of cinema.

'I am Cuba'

Kalatozov endured a share of controversy for this project. Released in 1964, just two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis and at the height of Soviet influence on the island, to mixed reviews from Cuban and Russian audiences, the varied opinions about the film's cultural and political implications suppressed it from larger audiences for decades, a kind of embargo that only fueled the film's mystique. For the Cubans, the film stereotyped and romanticized their culture; for the Russians, the film identified too directly with capitalism (stylistically, however, the film seems particularly aligned with Soviet tropes). It took decades and the movie muscles of Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese to bring the film back into the public eye in the 1990s. *I Am Cuba* now seems exceptionally revealing of the utopian idealism of the communist era.

Its ambitions, and visual tone, are stated at the beginning, with an aerial survey of the entire island, deceptively idyllic from this perspective. Things are more complex and varied down on the ground. Shot in a silvery black and white that almost seems infrared—palm fronds have a phosphorescent glow, as do the illuminated streets of Havana by night– and frequently utilizing a distorting fish-eye lens, *I am Cuba*, exudes an otherworldly quality that befits its intention as a reductive propaganda. The contrasts between the good of the people and the evil of capitalism are stark.

'I Am Cuba'

Yet they are depicted with a fluid pace and visual panache. Stephen Holden, in his 1995 *New York Times* review of the re-released version called it "Eisenstein filtered through ***La Dolce Vita*** with an Afro-Cuban pulse." There is a fantastically decadent opening scene featuring bathing beauties cavorting in a pool atop a modernist Havana high-rise hotel. The POV slithers through a bikinied throng of rum cocktails and crass tourists, the camera diving into the water, and then out again as the samba strains are muffled by the perspective. This is clearly a scene of excess, but its *Mad Men* era stylings make it also strangely attractive—something at the time duly noted by disapproving Soviet officials.

It's the first of numerous virtuosic long takes in which the camera seems to defy gravity, floating through dense layers of humanity, descending from heights into the masses. These recall, and easily surpass, the more familiar opening sequence of Orson Welles' 1958 ***Touch of Evil***. A particularly stunning *Cuba* sequence follows the funeral of a martyred revolutionary, an omniscient camera that seemingly passes through walls and floats over a massive crowd of mourners.

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This is not a film of fleshed out characters—it goes for symbolic figures. There are women forced into prostitution, a farmer driven to burn his fields rather than turn them over to an evil landowner, and young activists fighting the power.

Many scenes featuring historical and political moments in the uprising were remade to glamorize events through elaborate camera work and reconstructions of sites intensified with scale and poetic lighting. A horrifying sequence finds a Cuban woman harassed by hectoring American GIs, action illuminated by nighttime shop windows. A battlefield section at the end of the film captures the mortal grit of war and insurgence with harrowing detail. In another scene hoses spray rushes of water over the protagonists to heightened the tensions between protesting leftist students and the police. In another, a drive in movie screen is torched, a wonderful metaphor for the incendiary power of cinema as well as political rebellion.

I am Cuba lights the screen on fire, igniting the imagination in its address of cultural and artistic history.

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