

Julia Nguyen  
 Prof. Bartlett  
 Human H1BS  
 8 March 2024

Essay 4: Historical Film Analysis of Worldbuilding in Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*  
 (Currently about 6 pages when double spaced)

Clip chosen (We learn about María's occupation, story 1): 20:50-22:50

Intro/thesis: *Include more connections to Communism? Or potentially context on the correlation between prostitution and American Imperialism? more context on the specific clip*

In Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*, the first story follows the life of María, a Cuban woman who unwillingly works as a prostitute in a club catered to American men. María's boyfriend René is hopeful for their future together but is unaware of her occupation. This leaves María conflicted as she desires a life with René, however, she needs her job to continue to support herself financially. These two parts of her life: one as María and the other as Betty (her stage name) are juxtaposed within the cinematography of the film. **Through the use of photographic properties, long takes alongside camera distance, and opposing diegetic and nondiegetic sound, María's discontent with her occupation—created through increased American tourism—is demonstrated, alluding to Kalatozov's desire for anti-imperialism in Cuba.**

Body Paragraph 1: *Photographic properties (camera movement/lack thereof) → chooses to follow the men (portrays lust for Betty vs. yearning-of love-for María), sexualization / stable, slow following between her and René vs. quick paced following in the club, demanding/draining*

- ~~Contrast between filming establishing shots~~ Moved to paragraph 2
- *Camera following René vs. camera following one of the American men (one that didn't hold a large role within the story)*
- *Still shot - inability to escape*

The photographic properties seen with *I Am Cuba*, particularly the speed at which the scenes are filmed and movement of characters the camera mimics, symbolize the men's perception and desires of María. As a prostitute, María inherently lacks the same power her clients have—status, power, and money. Additionally, because of her position as a sex worker, men believe they're entitled to treat her with less respect since they are coming to her purely for sex. While discussing a man's desires with the female protagonist in the short film *El grito*, the author states, "His fantasy adheres to a model of heterosexuality and heteromascularity that assumes male financial dominance and ensures female sexual subordination" (Frohlich). Furthermore, in the film *Del lado del velo*, a shot where the woman is being gazed at by her husband through a mirror as she changes, "reinforc[ing] her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Frohlich). This mirror shot holds the same effect as the still shot where María is being introduced to the American men, particularly the man she ends up having to have sex with, Jim. When María is pulled to the American men's table, the camera stays still while keeping two of the three men in the frame alongside María who is positioned in the middle and full body in frame. During this scene, Jim is seen checking her out by looking at her up and down, adding to how the still shot represents her inability to escape sexualization with the lack of movement. This concept of

“to-be-looked-at-ness” alludes to the male gaze and how María is forced to be perceived purely sexually because of the occupation she was forced into, knowing outside of work she is religious and dresses modestly (Frohlich). Her positioning and body in frame further emphasize her being trapped, with a man on each side of her as she wears an outfit she typically wouldn’t wear because it’s skin tight and shows skin. Male centeredness is further emphasized when the camera chooses to mimic the movement of one of the American men as it sits and gets up at the same time as him, seen within the same scene. The subject of the camera is María and the camera is representative of the American male perception of her—with all lust filled eyes on her. In contrast, when the camera follows René, the movement is slow, controlled, and keeps only his and María’s upper bodies in frame. Following René’s eyes, he’s purely staring at María’s eyes and face. This directly contrasts the way Jim was viewing María as René’s actions convey his profound love for María while Jim only lusted after Betty.

Body Paragraph 2: *Long takes & camera distance → contemplation of her two lives, zoom in on distance—conveys the emotional disconnect between her and her job in comparison to the life she truly wants to live with René*

- *Camera distance literally shows how close she feels to work compared to her boyfriend*
- *Contrast between filming establishing shots*
- *Long takes are used; clip I examined only had one cut → gives the viewer time to focus in, to really get to see how María lives and what she must go through, creates a sense of uncomfortability*

[connect to conclusion sentence of body 1], long takes convey María’s contemplation of the double life she leads while the camera’s distance from María symbolizes the distance she feels emotionally from her personal life in comparison to her occupational life. During the scene where René is serenading María, the camera distance diminishes and keeps both of their faces within the frame while staying up close and personal. However in the scene where María meets the American men in the club, the camera is very distant from them all. This distance stays consistent with each of these groups, where the establishing shot with René zooms in on him to display the church in the background while the establishing shot in the club continuously creates distance between itself and María as she traverses the club. The camera distance directly represents María’s emotional connection to her personal life in comparison to her occupational life. She feels dissonance between her and her job because it goes against her personal values, that being her loyalty to René alongside her faith. In comparison, she feels the closest to René which is demonstrated through the closeness of the camera when they’re seen interacting with one another. The church seen behind René is large, clear, and the still shot after René was being followed with the church in the background establishes how her life with René is the end goal. However in the club, following María feels chaotic as the screen is constantly being obstructed, the foggy atmosphere, and never staying still until she’s pulled aside by a coworker. This demonstrates the instability and lack of passion associated with prostitution, demeaning the occupation as it contrasts with what is portrayed as the perfect, idealized life created between René and María. María’s life is divided into two, where she must decide which is the better path: achieving true love or being able to survive. This contemplation of which choice she

should follow is demonstrated through long shots. The choice of a long shot allows pressure to be built, representing the pressure María feels

Body Paragraph 3: *Diegetic and nondiegetic sound → creating the vibe between home vs. outsider, starts siding us with René ("Cuban" sound vs. "American" sound)*

- *Diegetic sound of René singing*
- *Nondiegetic sound of the club's music*
- *Juxtaposition created between the two, demonstrated through a SMASH CUT (briefly mention the impact of the smash cut? Even though it doesn't really fit within the topic sentence*

[connect to conclusion sentence of body 2], diegetic and nondiegetic sound create a juxtaposition between Cuba and America, serving the purpose of persuading the viewer to begin siding with René (i.e. Cuba). René serves as a representation of the typical, hard working citizen in Cuba pre-imperialism, seen through his desires for a settled down life with his girlfriend. In contrast, the American men symbolize the American bourgeoisie who utilize their power, money, and status to take advantage of the proletariat in Cuba. Diegetic sound is introduced when René is serenading María about his dreams of progressing his job as a fruit seller, gently singing to her. Nondiegetic sound is introduced once a smash cut occurs, switching from María and René outdoors to María indoors, with this sound being a mysterious, seductive type of jazz music. While discussing the history of jazz and the revolution in Cuba, the author mentions, "Music historians and scholars have shown how revolutionary Cuba distanced itself from jazz and other US-identified musical expressions in the 1960s at the same time that such forms flourished in local musical venues" (Borge 147). The diegetic sound provides a sense of home, genuinity, and familiarity as it's coming directly from René and through the film. However, the nondiegetic sound feels artificial, out of place, and the genre alludes to the club's relationship with American tourists. Similarly to how revolutionary Cuba distanced itself from US-identified musical expressions, the juxtaposition between René's singing and the seductive jazz music creates a divide between María's life with René versus her occupational life (Borge 147).

Body Paragraph 4: *Connect the three and demonstrate how they create the narrative that imperialism in Cuba only negatively impacts Cubans*

- *Foreigners coming just for sex, takes away from the livelihood of women*
- *Sexualization/fetization of "foreign" women*
- *(Connecting the previous two) essentially trying to paint capitalism and imperialism in a poor light because of their dehumanization of women and theft of the livelihood of Cuban natives*
- *Uses the bond/relationship between the couple to push for support of social equality and anti-imperialism*

The perception, representation, and emotional dissonance of María alongside René's enthusiasm and hopefulness seen within the story are used to convey the impact of American imperialism in Cuba, attempting to persuade viewers to feel opposed to this imperialism. The author of "*Cuba, My Love: The Romance of Revolutionary Cuba in the Soviet Sixties*" argues

suggestive photos included in media during the revolutionary Cuban era convey, “the decadent eroticism of the tourist experience in Batista-era Cuba are meant to be anti-American” (Gorsuch 518). María’s work outfit alongside the context of her occupation serves as representing the suggestive media involved in films during revolutionary Cuba, directly serving the purpose of demonstrating the negative effects of sex work driven by American tourism and imperialism. María is dehumanized, reduced to Betty—an American appealing name—all to earn a living to survive. Under capitalism, which was brought through American imperialism, María serves as one of the many stories of women who were forced into sex work, stripping away their autonomy to their own life. Capitalism is continuously critiqued through the use of sound as well, subconsciously putting the viewer against the American men and feeling more inclined to side with René. The juxtaposition of the joyous, hopeful singing the audience directly hears from René opposed to the lower octave, sensuous artificial sound from the club makes it feel like the only side the viewer should be taking is with René. I want to talk more about the techniques in relation to the prompt, but I’m not sure how.

*Conclusion: The cinematography practices [be specific] used throughout the film builds a narrative in opposition to American imperialism in Cuba through portraying the displeasure of being forced to be a prostitute in Cuba—something actively stripping María’s goals to living the life she truly desires (perhaps be more specific with the life she wants to live? What does that entail? How does René manifest this dream?)*

The cinematography practices used throughout the film builds a narrative in opposition to American imperialism in Cuba through portraying the displeasure of being forced to be a prostitute—something actively stripping María’s goals to living the life she truly desires. The lack of choice María has is weaponized to display how American imperialism and capitalism robs the Cuban people of their basic needs.

Works Cited

- Borge, Jason. "The Hazards of Hybridity: Afro-Cuban Jazz, Mambo, and Revolution." *Tropical Riffs: Latin America and the Politics of Jazz*, Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 131–62. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1220r5c.8>. Accessed 4 Mar. 2024.
- Frohlich, M.G. (2023). *Mejunje and Ajiaco: The Many Flavors of Gender and Sexuality in Cine Joven*. In: *Sexual Diversity in Young Cuban Cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18946-3\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18946-3_5)
- Gorsuch, Anne E. "'Cuba, My Love': The Romance of Revolutionary Cuba in the Soviet Sixties." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2015, pp. 497–526. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43696680>. Accessed 4 Mar. 2024.
- I Am Cuba (Soy Cuba)*. Directed by Mikhail Kalatozov. Mosfilm / Milestone Films / Kino Lorber, 1964.