

Milestone presents::  
A Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese presentation  
Directed by Mikhail Kalatozov  
Cinematography by Sergei Urusevsky  
Script by Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Enrique Pineda Barnet

## I AM CUBA

*“Visually Staggering ...  
A newly discovered classic!  
Deliriously choreographed ...  
I AM CUBA is one  
gorgeous image after another.  
Astounding ... Incredible!”*

□ Dennis Harvey, Variety

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### I AM CUBA

Cuba/USSR. 1964. 141 minutes. Black & White.  
In Spanish and English with Russian voice-over and English subtitles.  
Produced and Directed by: Mikhail Kalatozov.  
Screenplay: Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Enrique Pineda Barnet.  
Camera: Sergei Urusevsky.  
Camera Operators: Alexander Calzatti and B. Brozhovsky.  
Production Managers: Simyon Maryachim and Miguel Mendoza.  
First Assistant Director: Bella Friedman.  
Assistant Camera Operators: M. Oropesa, K. Shipov, M. A. Ramírez.  
Set Design: Yevgeny Svidetelev.  
Music: Carlos Fariñas.  
Artistic Consultation and Costumes: Rene Portocarrero.  
Sound Producer: V. Sharun.  
Assistant Sound Producer: R. Plaza.  
Choreographer: A. Suez.  
Editor: N. Glagoleva.  
Montage Assistant: Lida Turina.  
Orchestral Directors: E. Kachaturian and M. Duchesne.  
Continuity: B. Trabkin and A. Vinokurov.  
Makeup: V. Rudinoy and L. Cáceres.  
Production Assistants: M. Volovich, O. Zernov, G. Tanner, L. García, R. Brutes, S. Miguel.  
Second Unit Directors: J. Rouko, K. Ctenkin, T. Vargina.  
Administrators: E. Ribero, R. Romay, M. Mora, R. Negrín.  
Senior Translator: Pavel Grushko.  
Lighting Crew: V. Mikhailob and G. Cantero.  
Production Crew: A. Obregón, L. Carrillo, J. Cruz, J. Varona.  
Still Photographer: R. Dovo.  
Pyrotechnics: V. Pugachev, E. Fong, B. Sukharetzky.

Costumes and Props: K. García, E. Musteler, M. Trabas, M. Noah, F. Labrador.  
Consultants: A. Fonseca and R. Fariñas.

### Cast

Luz María Collazo ( <i>Maria/Betty</i> )	Salvador Vud	Héctor Castañeda
José Gallardo ( <i>Pedro</i> )	Raúl García ( <i>Enrique</i> )	Rosando
Lamadris		
Sergio Corrieri ( <i>Alberto</i> )	Jean Bouise ( <i>Jim</i> )	Roberto Vilar
Alberto Morgan	Celia Rodríguez ( <i>Gloria</i> )	Roberto Cabrera
Fausto Mirabal	Roberto García York ( <i>American activist</i> )	Alfredo Ávila
María de las Mercedes Díez	Bárbara Domínguez	José Espinosa
Jesús del Monte	Luisa María Jiménez ( <i>Teresa</i> )	Isabel Moreno
Mario González Broche ( <i>Pablo</i> )	Tony López	Manuel Mora

Voice of Cuba: Raquel Revuelta. Russian Text Readers: N. Nikitina and G. Yepifantzev.  
A joint production of the film studios Mosfilm (USSR) and ICAIC (Cuba)  
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*"The film studios Mosfilm and ICAIC thank the insurgent army, the people's militia, the Cuban Ministry of Interior Affairs and Academy of Sciences, and also those who gave help in the creation of this film."*

### Synopsis

It is dawn. From a helicopter, the camera travels down the coast of Cuba. Sunlight sparkles on ocean waves lapping against white beaches. The camera sweeps over eerie white palms and back out over the ocean. On the shore a huge white cross looms above the trees against a dark sky.

*I am Cuba*

*Once Christopher Columbus landed here.*

*He wrote in his diary:*

*"This is the most beautiful land ever seen by human eyes."*

*Thank you Señor Columbus.*

*When you saw me for the first time,*

*I was singing and laughing.*

*I waved the fronds of my palms to greet your sails.*

*I thought your ships brought happiness.*

*I am Cuba.*

*Ships took my sugar and left me tears...*

*Strange thing — sugar, Señor Columbus.*

*It contains so many tears, but it is sweet...*

A sinewy boatman poles a small skiff through a narrow channel flanked by small houses on stilts where children play in the water and villagers wash their clothes. The man crouches low as the boat glides under a low plank bridges that crosses the stream while a woman balancing a package on her head passes above...

Suddenly a rock-and-roll trio is blaring away on the rooftop of a high-rise building overlooking the beaches of Havana. As the musicians dance and play, a bevy of bathing beauties stroll by. An announcer calls on the crowd to applaud the contestants as the camera moves down the side of the building to reveal affluent sunbathers all clapping for the beautiful girls. In the same long continuous take, the camera roams among the sunbathers drinking cocktails and playing cards around the swimming pool. Still in the same uninterrupted shot, it follows a tall brunette in a bikini as she gets up from her chaise lounge and walks into the pool. The camera then dives below the surface to film the swimmers underwater.

In a smoky nightclub decorated with bamboo poles and giant wooden idols, a Latin crooner plaintively sings “Amor Loco” (Crazy Love). At a table, three Americans place their orders for drinks and companionship. Only Jim, the bearded man in a bow tie, drinking limeade doesn’t select one of the girls at the bar. The Americans ask for a happier song and a bevy of masked dancers appear and strut to a pounding drumbeat.

René the handsome fruit seller sings his song of oranges, pineapples and California plums as he pushes his cart through the sunny streets of Havana. Enrique and another young man approach the cart and René hands them “fruit” — a packet of papers. He sings to Maria and tells her that someday they will be married in the beautiful white cathedral. He offers to bring fruit to her at her job, if only she will tell him where she works. She just turns away. He gives her a tangerine and tells her he loves her. As she walks away, he calls to her, “Maria, Maria...”

Back in the nightclub, Maria enters, dressed in a chic black dress, her hair pulled back. One of the bar girls runs up to her, calling “Betty, Betty.” The women join the Americans’ table. One of the men makes a joke about the tangerine that Betty holds in her hand and she puts it in her handbag. Jim is especially taken with the handsome crucifix she wears. When the men draw lots for the girls, Jim “wins” Betty and his friend remarks that he always has good luck with crosses. The music starts and the Americans and the girls take to the dance floor. When the dance music changes to a driving African rhythm, Betty seems overwhelmed, even frightened. Then she begins to move to the music. As she dances and gyrates to the furious beat, the others crowd around, gaping and applauding nightmarishly.

As they leave the club, Jim tells Betty that it would be “interesting” to see where she lives. They take a taxi to a neighborhood of broken-down shacks. In her tiny one-room hut, Betty removes a worn quilt from the bed. Jim tries to convince her to keep her crucifix on, but she insists on removing it ...

The next morning, Jim eats the tangerine as he dresses. He places money on the bed and offers to pay Betty for her cross. When she refuses, the American adds more money and then pockets the crucifix. As he stands to go, they hear singing. René walks in with an armful of fruit. Jim leaves, saying, “Good-bye, Betty.” René looks at the woman on the bed and repeats, “Betty?”

Outside, Jim tries to find his way through the maze of shacks and narrow alleys. Children mob him and beg for money. Everywhere he turns he sees the faces of young women, little children and worn-out old men. The camera rises above the rooftops to show us his progress through the crowded slum.

*I am Cuba.  
Why are you running away?  
You came here to have fun.  
Go ahead, have fun!  
Isn't this a happy picture?  
Don't avert your eyes. Look!  
I am Cuba.  
For you, I am the casino, the bar, hotels and brothels.  
But the hands of these children and old people are also me.  
I am Cuba.*

As a rainstorm pounds outside his hut, Pedro, an old peasant, watches his sleeping children. He dreams of the past, and see scenes of his wedding to his lovely young bride, happy days with their first child and later himself and his two children at his wife’s grave. He remembers the landowner convincing him to sign a lease for his land by putting his thumbprint on a document.

As the rain and his memories subside, Pedro goes into the fields and tells the sugar cane to grow tall, for his children's sake.

Pedro and his teenage son and daughter are harvesting the tall sugar cane. Suddenly, they hear horses approaching and Pablo calls out to his father that it is Señor Acosta, the landowner. Flanked by two henchman (one with a rifle) Acosta announces that he has sold his lands to the United Fruit Company. When Pedro asks "What about my sugar cane?" the landowner says, "You raised it on *my* land." Acosta tells the old man that his house is not his anymore. "Have you forgotten this little piece of paper?" he asks, "You can't forge a signature like that!" With the man's words ringing in his head, Pedro slashes furiously at the cane with his machete. He tells Pablo and Teresa (who have not overheard the news) that they can go to the village and gives them his last peso.

At the tiny village, Pablo and Teresa buy Coca Colas and put money in the jukebox. Teresa dances happily. Meanwhile, their father sets fire to the sugar cane and then torches his shack. He raises his machete to kill his old horse, but cannot. The skies darken with smoke as the old man falls besides the pyre of his home.

*I am Cuba.*

*Sometimes it seems to me that the trunks of my palm trees are full of blood.*

*Sometimes it seems to me that the murmuring sounds around us are not the ocean,  
but choked-back tears.*

*Who answers for this blood?*

*Who is responsible for these tears?*

In newsreel footage, General Fulgencio Batista receives an award and celebrates US-Cuban relations. As Cuban soldiers march to "Anchors Aweigh," the camera pulls back to reveal that the film is being shown in on the screen of a drive-in movie. Suddenly, Enrique and his friends rush out from amidst the cars and fling Molotov cocktails. Batista's face reappears as the screen erupts in flames. Enrique and his companions flee in a convertible down streets lined with signs for General Electric, Esso and other U.S. corporations. The car pulls up in front of a fashionable department store and the men go their separate ways. Nearby, a band of drunken U.S. sailors sing "Gobs on the Loose" and surround a frightened woman, Gloria. She escapes into the store doorway where Enrique is loitering. When the sailors follow her, Enrique stands up to them and after a brief confrontation, the men leave, singing loudly. As she goes off into the night, Gloria says, "Thank you, Enrique."

Riding a bus the next day, Enrique hears a newspaper seller on a bicycle call out the news that Fidel Castro is dead. From the window of the moving bus, he buys a paper and reads the shocking headlines. At the university, Enrique joins friends who tell him that the story is a lie. The students argue whether they should work to spread the news that Castro is alive and raising an army in the Sierra Maestra or whether they should revenge the murders of their fellow students. Enrique says that they must kill the "fat murderer" of their comrades. Alberto, the group's leader responds that the students must help Castro overthrow the system.

Outside a modern apartment building, Enrique listens to street singer's song of love betrayed. On the rooftop, he takes a rifle that has been hidden there and looks through the telescopic sight at a building across the way. A fat man appears on a balcony and Enrique takes aim. As he watches, the man and his family sit down to a breakfast of fried eggs. As the street singer's song echoes in his head, Enrique drops the gun and runs wildly to the street below where he is almost hit by a car. Alberto drives up and rescues Enrique from the irate motorist. Enrique tells Alberto that he couldn't shoot the fat man, Alberto — angry that Enrique took matters into his own hands — demands if he had considered the consequences.

Police burst into a room at the university where students are printing leaflets in support of Castro. One student breaks away and runs to the window to scatter his papers and shout “Long live freedom!” A shot rings out. As the leaflets float above, the young man’s body spirals wildly to the plaza below. A crowd gathers ...

*I am Cuba.  
There are two paths for people when they are born.  
The path of slavery — it crushes and decays.  
And the path of the star — it illuminates but kills.  
These are the words of José Martí.  
You will choose the star.  
Your path will be hard, and it will be marked by blood.  
But in the name of justice wherever a single person goes,  
thousands more will rise up.  
And when there will be no more people,  
then the stones will rise up.  
I am Cuba.*

As the police take the handcuffed students out of the building, a fat police officer — the very man that Enrique could not kill — takes aim and shoots one of the young activists in the back. The police cars speed down the street, sirens screaming.

Standing at the feet of the statue of Alma Mater, Enrique addresses the crowd that has gathered in the plaza. As a flock of birds circles above, a shot echoes and a white dove falls. Students sing the Cuban national anthem as Enrique holds the dead bird aloft and leads the crowd down the cascading stairway to the street below. There, the protesters are met by police with high-powered water hoses. Gloria spots Enrique and calls to him. Many marchers brave the water jets and overturn cars. Amid the burning cars and buffeting spray, Enrique picks up a rock and walks toward the fat cop. The policeman takes careful aim and shoots. Enrique falls ...

Alberto covers his dead friend’s face with the Cuban flag and helps carry his body past the wreckage of the burning cars. To the sound of tolling bells, a funeral cortege follows Enrique’s body through the streets of Havana. In a dazzling single shot, the camera rises from street level, travels up the side of a building, crosses the street, enters a window, moves through a room where workers are rolling cigars, then launches out into space and proceeds down the length of a street filled with mourners from a vantage point in the middle of the thoroughfare and above the rooftops.

At night, deep in the swamps, government troops capture three rebel soldiers. They shine a light in each man’s face and ask “Where is Fidel?” Each answers, “I am Fidel.”

An exhausted freedom fighter approaches a hut in the mountains where Amelia, a peasant woman is pounding corn. Her husband, Mariano invites him to sit down and offers him a plate of food. The peasant, noticing the rifle, says that he wants to live in peace and orders the soldier to go. After the rebel leaves, they hear the sound of bombs falling nearby. Terrified the parents gather up their children and desperately run for cover. Their home is demolished in a fiery explosion. When he searches for his young son, Mariano discovers only a blackened doll. After the bombing ends, Mariano is reunited with the rest of his family. He tells his wife that he has to go.

High in the Sierra Maestre Mountains, rebel troops are massing to the sounds of Insurgent Radio broadcasts. As men from all walks of life gather, the radio celebrates their struggle. The rebel soldier runs into Mariano and tells him, “I knew you would come.” Mariano says that now he

needs a rifle. The freedom fighter tells him that he has to capture a gun in battle, as they have all done.

*I am Cuba.  
Your arms have gotten used to farming tools,  
but now a rifle is in your hands.  
You are not shooting to kill.  
You are firing at the past.  
You are firing to protect your future.*

The guerrillas battle the government troops as they sing the Cuban anthem. Mariano wins a rifle in hand-to-hand combat, as his comrades sing “Do not fear a glorious death; to die for your motherland is to live.” The triumphant rebel forces march to universal celebration and joy.

### **The Production**

On November 25, 1962, the *New York Times* carried a Reuters' wire service report from Havana:

*Mikhail Kalatozov, the Soviet director whose film The Cranes are Flying won international acclaim, will begin work on a joint Soviet-Cuban production here in January ... The film, Soy Cuba will be based on a script by the Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko and the Cuban poet Enrique Barnet.*

The announcement came just a year after the U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion and less than a month after the world had reached the brink of nuclear conflict in the Cuban missile crisis. Although the missile confrontation was a victory for the United States, there was still great international optimism and hope for Cuba's future. Castro's regime was devoting tremendous resources for schools, hospitals and literacy brigades and the Cuban people remained dedicated to their charismatic leader and his ideals.

Both the Cuban rebellion and the 1917 Russian revolution that inspired it were led by men — Castro and Lenin — who believed in the revolutionary power of film to educate and inspire and both supported filmmaking that transcended mere propaganda. *Potemkin, Storm over Asia, October, The End of St. Petersburg* — the list is endless — combined great artistry and groundbreaking techniques with political fervor.

Influenced by Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein, Mikhail Kalatozov wanted to create his own *Potemkin* for the people of Cuba. Just as Eisenstein's *Potemkin* had celebrated the Russian people's freedom from the Czars, *I am Cuba* would glorify that country's liberation from Batista and his exploitive U.S.-backed dictatorship. Like Eisenstein, Kalatozov wanted to create a new cinematic language to express his political beliefs and personal vision — and he similarly risked (and faced) official censure when his films veered off from the official party line.

With *I am Cuba*, Mosfilm and ICAIC got far more than they bargained for — Kalatozov's masterpiece is wildly schizophrenic celebration of Communist kitsch, mixing Slavic solemnity with Latin sensuality. The plot, or rather plots, feverishly explore the seductive, decadent (and marvelously photogenic) world of Batista's Cuba — deliriously juxtaposing images of rich Americans and bikini-clad beauties sipping cocktails with scenes of ramshackle slums filled with hungry children and old people. Using wide-angle lenses that distort and magnify and filters that transform palm trees into giant white feathers, Urusevsky's acrobatic camera achieves wild, gravity-defying angles as it glides effortlessly through long *continuous* shots. But *I Am Cuba* is not just a catalog of bravura technique — it also succeeds in exploring the innermost feelings of the characters and their often-desperate situations.

Begun before the Cuban missile crisis, the preproduction on *I Am Cuba* took longer than most films — over a year — because Kalatozov went to great lengths to plan every aspect of the film’s script and look. Yevgeny Yevtushenko was a perfect choice to co-write the screenplay, despite (or perhaps *because* of) his inexperience as a scriptwriter. The world-famous poet had worked as a correspondent in Cuba for *Pravda* and was (at that time) a friend of Castro’s. Kalatozov was interested in working with Yevtushenko because of his “youthful innovative spirit.” For Yevtushenko’s Cuban counterpart, he chose Enrique Pineda Barnet, a well-known novelist. Kalatozov, Yevtushenko and cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky began preproduction by traveling to Cuba to prepare the script. There they met with Pineda Barnet at the Balalaika nightclub — where all four discovered they shared a devotion for Hemingway, Mayakovsky, Matisse and Picasso (and a dislike for that particular club). The three Soviets were also in Cuba to find a composer (ironically, they discovered Cuban Carlos Fariñas later in Moscow) and a painter for the production. For the latter, they chose Rene Portocarrero, Cuba’s greatest artist. Portocarrero also designed the poster for the Cuban release.

Pineda Barnet, Kalatozov, Yevtushenko and Urusevsky toured Cuba and studied Cuban folklore to gather background material for the script. The three Soviets were most interested in, as Pineda Barnet called it, “the moral fallout of Cuba’s colonial past.” They visited many of Havana’s nightclubs where they delighted in the joyous freedom of Cuban music. Kalatozov tape-recorded many interviews with those who took part in the revolution as preparation for the film — this preserved the ‘emotional temperature’ of being in Cuba. Later, while filming the student riots, people would approach them to describe how the scenes had actually occurred, offering reminiscences and advice. The filmmaking team also watched documentaries and features of past and present Cuba. A constant visitor to ICAIC’s screening rooms at the time was Fidel Castro, who spent many evenings watching films. Alexander Calzatti, assistant cameraman on *I am Cuba*, remembers that many of Castro’s favorite films were Hollywood movies. The men met with Haydee Santamaría, a veteran of the Moncada massacre and with Che Guevara, who spent the day reliving the *Granma* voyage, the battles in the Sierra Maestra and the final march to Havana. From that time on Guevara acted as an unofficial advisor to the film and often dropped by the set.

Castro told Pineda Barnet that the filmmakers had to visit the Sierra Maestra, “even if you have to go on a donkey.” There the men visited the scenes of the revolution and met Raúl Castro, who told them stories of those perilous days. Like his brother Fidel, Raúl loved the cinema and the men had long discussions about the art of film. When they returned to Havana, the four began work on the script. Along the way, Yevtushenko wrote several poems inspired by their journey and Urusevsky took many photos and filmed many locations with his small movie camera.

The first draft was a scene-by-scene recreation of the Cuban revolution. But the writers felt burdened with too much historical material and decided instead to make a cinematic poem: “the main heroine would be the revolution — the hero would be the people.” Their goal was not to elevate any one individual (in the film, Castro is mentioned but never seen), but to show the “historic necessity” of the people’s break from Batista’s American-backed government. They decided to divide the screenplay into five stages:

- 1) colonialism, and its affects on the city,
- 2) the tragedy of the peasants,
- 3) the gestation of the workers/students’ struggle.
- 4) the struggle in the plains (the disastrous invasion on the Moncada army barracks)
- 5) the struggle in the mountains and the final triumph.

This breakdown became the basis for the completed script, although the fourth segment was never filmed. Pineda Barnet described the men’s working relationship:

*We had group meetings: Kalatozov, Urusevsky, Yevgeny and me. We discussed subjects, ideas, characters, situations... Whenever we got to an agreement, we would separate to elaborate on it. Yevgeny locked himself in his room on the 17th floor of the Havana-Libre Hotel. I worked in my house near the waterfront. Kalatozov and Urusevsky listened to music, wandered around the streets of Havana, shot scenes freely, and tried filters, natural light and locations. Every time any of us got results, we met to discuss the development. Sometimes Kalatozov gave us an idea to work on, sometimes Urusevsky did. Other times Yevgeny and I met alone to exchange impressions and I told him about personal experiences or some well-known anecdote, or I just supplied him with more information about the Cuban atmosphere. In the last meetings, we selected the best of all our efforts. When we presented the project to the meeting of the ICAIC, we had a beginning that was more or less worked out, and the rest was in the form of synopsis. It received some constructive criticism as well as some observations and advice from Che Guevara, [filmmaker Julio] García Espinosa, [filmmaker Tomás] Gutiérrez Alea. We had the project fully outlined — now we needed to fill in the details, which would take many months.*

It was now January 1962. The three Soviets returned to Moscow to work on the script and Pineda Barnet followed the next month. When Pineda Barnet arrived in Moscow, he found a land covered in snow. Kalatozov, Yevtushenko and Urusevsky and his wife Belka met him at the airport and gave him a tour of the city. To help them in their work on the script, Kalatozov encouraged Pineda Barnet and Yevtushenko to watch various edited and unedited versions of Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico*. Kalatozov later introduced them to Eisenstein's former assistant, Grigori Alexandrov. They also screened other Soviet productions (Pineda Barnet found some inspiring, others dreadful) and visited the set of Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace*. Pineda Barnet wrote about Kalatozov's vision for the film:

*Kalatozov told us about his idea of a script where dialogue would not need translation. In other words, to try to include the least possible amount of dialogue, including only the words strictly necessary and in that, they would be so expressive there would be no need for translation.*

*We were getting ready to start the work on the third part (the students-workers' struggle), for which we had already prepared a synopsis in Havana. We discussed the elements that were going to be more or less emphasized. We also agreed that the characters would not necessarily appear in all five subplots (back in Havana, we had originally wanted the same group of characters to interact in all five stories). Now we could treat subjects related to our main characters without having to give a biographical or narrative account of each one.*

At this time the group met Carlos Fariñas, a highly regarded Cuban composer who had written the scores for several well-known ballets, who was presently studying at Moscow's Tchaikovsky Conservatory. Fariñas was a great help to Pineda Barnet — for the first time in Moscow, the writer was able to speak with a fellow Cuban artist who could make suggestions and critiques. The third part of the story had become such a problem, that the group went on to start work on the fourth. It was Kalatozov — belying his “official” reputation as a filmmaker of style rather than content — who pushed the writers for more insight into the characters and urged them to go beyond stereotypes to discover the virtues and weaknesses of each man and woman in the film. At this time, an idea for a sixth story, of present-day Cuba, was proposed. After much discussion, the idea was abandoned.

By May Day, the team was now concerned that the script was too long and that some scenes lacked depth and strength. All agreed that the script needed major editing to make the film leaner and more powerful. Kalatozov made many of the cuts in the first and second stories —

eliminating scenes that were unnecessary for the advancement of the plot — and the four men were happy with the final version. According to Pineda Barnet, every scene now seemed integral and irreplaceable. For the first time, he began to understand the dynamics of scriptwriting and the vision that Kalatozov had in mind. Pineda Barnet began to work with great enthusiasm on the third and fourth stories. Kalatozov further helped the young writer by suggesting that he write some scenes in the form of poems and then put them in terms of normal film description.

In Cuba, Kalatozov began to assemble his cast. They came from all walks of life, but always students to play students, peasants to play peasants, et cetera:

*I am a food service worker. I was born 53 years ago — exactly the year of the Mexican Revolution. I work in an INIT restaurant in Boca de Jaruco, in Guanabo. In other words, I am not a peasant — even though Kalatozov thought that I have an amazing guajiro (peasant) look — but a restaurant worker. The restaurant is called “Pollo Pampero” since we serve the best Pampero chicken in all Guanabo. When my companions heard that I was going to work in the movies, they said that they had always known that I would be a good actor because I look like Spencer Tracy. That’s what they say. I can easily pretend to be a guajiro because I experienced the life of a peasant when I was responsible for “social distribution” at a hacienda (ranch). In the movie I play Pedro ... According to the screenplay, I have to die in my shack in the middle of the flames. I am very curious to see how they are planning to shoot this scene because the truth is that I’m not going to let them burn even my little finger. No way.*

— José Gallardo

*I am 15 years old and a student at the Academia de Arte Dramático. I had just arrived one morning and was getting some coffee when Kalatozov saw me and thought that I would be great as Pedro’s daughter in the movie. In the movie we are shooting now, I still don’t know why we’re doing what we’re doing and I don’t have a very clear idea about how things are going to look on screen.*

— Luisa María Jiménez

*I study acting at the Escuela Nacional de Arte. I have been interested in theater for many years. I put a group together, and directed some plays at Central Fe (now the Central José María Pérez), where my father works. Kalatozov chose me because he thought I looked perfect to play the role of a young Cuban guajiro.*

— Mario González Broche

Many other actors had similar stories. Kalatozov said during the making of the film:

*I have not chosen experienced actors — some have never acted before, while others are just getting started. I think that cinema does not really require professional actors, because what counts more than anything is the human presence. That is what creates a character on screen.*

One of the more interesting additions to the cast was the black singer in the bar scene at the beginning of the film. His name was Ignacio, but before the revolution he lived in America and was famous as the falsetto lead of the pop group, The Platters.

Once the cast was set, the momentous task of creating *I am Cuba* lay in the hands of Kalatozov, Urusevsky and the camera operator Alexander Calzatti. Although Urusevsky had great vision and enormous talent, he did not have the technical training that the very young cameraman had received in film school. Calzatti’s professor was Eisenstein’s legendary associate, Eduard Tisse, and his father (still living in Los Angeles) was also well known Soviet cinematographer who had

also worked with Kalatozov. In fact, Calzatti's first professional film experience had been as an intern on *The Cranes are Flying*.

It was left to Calzatti devise the technical requirements for the many complicated and elaborate shots in *I am Cuba*. For the dreamlike opening of the film and for many of the shots throughout the film — where palm trees and sugar cane look like white feathers against the black sea or sky — Urusevsky and Calzatti were among the first to use infrared film stock (obtained at great effort from an East German film lab). The men also experimented with many filters. What made *I am Cuba* especially difficult to film was the fact that 97% of the film was shot hand-held. The camera of choice was an Eclair, an ultra-light French camera that held a five-minute roll of film. For the famous scene where in a long traveling shot, the camera descends from the rooftop of a building, down to a swinging scene overlooking Havana and finally, *into* the swimming pool, Calzatti had to make a watertight box out of sheets of Dupont plastic with three handles so the camera (using a 9.8mm lens) could be passed between Urusevsky and Calzatti at crucial moments. On the first take, the camera box refused to dive beneath the water surface, and Calzatti had to adapt the box with a hollow steel tube running through it so the air could escape the box, but no water would enter the camera.

For the crane shot where Pedro sets fire to his hut, the crew devised a closed-camera video system to view their work while shooting — twenty years before this technique was “invented” in Hollywood. For their monitor, Urusevsky took his personal Russian television set from his home in Moscow and held it on the plane all the way to Cuba.

The eerie shot of Enrique's death, where the camera swirls around and the image “dissolves” was difficult to conceive and easy to achieve. First, the filters in front of the lens were twisted to distort the image, oil was poured down on a plastic sheet in front of the lens and then in the laboratory, the image slowly faded into its negative image and was freeze-framed.

The shooting of *I am Cuba* lasted almost two years and during that time an astonishing amount of footage was shot. Although brief mentions of the film appeared, the film was never shown outside of the Soviet Union and Cuba and was effectively lost until today.

In 1992, Tom Luddy and Bill Pence presented a tribute to Mikhail Kalatozov at the Telluride Film Festival and screened *I am Cuba* (unsubtitled) for the first time in America. It had a great reception — among others, filmmakers Bertrand Tavernier and the Quay Brothers became big fans of the film. At the 1993 San Francisco International Film Festival, *I am Cuba* was shown to a sold-out audience who gave the film a standing ovation *during* the screening — twice. Milestone heard about the film from friends who had attended that screening and went on to acquire the rights from Mosfilm and ICAIC, commission a new translation and subtitles and strike new 35mm subtitled prints and fine grain from the original negative.

### **Mikhail Kalatozov**

(December 28, 1903 - March 27, 1973)

Mikhail K. Kalatozov (Kä' lä tô' zov) was born in Tiflis (now Tbilisi), Georgia as Mikhail Konstantinovich Kalatozishvili. After leaving school at fourteen, he worked as a mechanic and driver while studying for his high school diploma. Kalatozov went on to business school to study economics until a job as a projectionist in a movie theater convinced him he wanted to get into film. In 1925, he was admitted to the Tbilisi Film Studios where he acted in small roles and learned the arts of cinematography and editing. First appearing as an actor in Ivan Perestiani's *Dyelo Tariel Mklavadze* (*The Case of the Murder of Tariel Mklavadze*), he soon was working as a cameraman under Lev Kuleshov on *Locomotive No. 1000b*. Kalatozov followed this work by shooting and co-writing several documentaries and science films including L. Push and Nikolai Shengelaya's *Giulli* and L. Push's *Tsiganskaya krov* (*Gypsy Blood*). His first influences included famed documentarians Dziga Vertov (*The Man with a Movie Camera*, *Enthusiasm*, *Three Songs*

of *Lenin*, et cetera) and Esther Shub (*The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*). Kalatozov met Shub in 1927 and the two became friends.

In 1928, Kalatozov, with codirector Nutsa Gogoberidze, employed Shub's style of historical compilation film to make a documentary about Georgia from 1918 to 1928, naturally called *18-28* which concerned the counter-revolutionary activities of the Mensheviks and *Ikh tsartsvo* (*Their Kingdom*). In 1930, he partnered with famed writer and critic Sergei Tretyakov (a colleague of Vertov's and a member of his Kino-Eye group) for a film entitled *Slepaya* (*Blind*). The pair went on to make one of the great documentaries in Soviet cinema, *Sol Dia Svanetia* (*Salt for Svanetia*, 1930). The film explores Svanetia, a valley in the Caucasus Mountains of Georgia, 6,000 feet above sea level, where life remained almost unchanged from the Middle Ages. Jay Leyda in his book *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, quotes a description of the film from a Soviet sales catalog:

*Life is patriarchal, primitive; the struggle for existence among the snow-capped mountains entails such constant want and hunger, and particularly, the tormenting hunger for salt, that each new birth is regarded as a terrible curse, while death becomes a solemn feast. Bloody offerings were made at the graves of the dead; horses and beeves were slaughtered in honor of their pagan gods, Salema and Dala.*

When Leyda saw the film in 1934, he wrote to a friend in the U.S., "It is absolutely the most powerful documentary film I've ever seen ... it would absolutely stun any private film society that had the opportunity to see it." But like many of his brethren in the Soviet film world, Kalatozov fell under suspicion. Critics of *Salt for Svanetia* charged that the film showed ancient traditions and superstitions that no longer existed in the new Soviet world — although the film showed that new roads built by the Communist would forever change Svanetia for the better. However officials attached the dreaded charges of "formalism" and "naturalism" to the film.

With his next film, *Gvozd v sapoge* (*Nail in the Boot*, 1932), Kalatozov completely lost official favor and this depiction of the Soviet Army was forever banned. The film put a nail in Kalatozov's own career. Unable to make films, he finished post-graduate work at the Leningrad Academy of Art and then went to work as the head of the Tbilisi and Lenfilm studios. His next film, *Mut* (*Manhood*, 1939) — which was not made until seven years later — was a slight film of foreign espionage and aviation.

Kalatozov's next film, *Valeri Chkalov* (*Wings of Victory*, 1941) was a biography of great Russian aviator, Valeri Chkalov, the first man to fly from the USSR over the North Pole to the U.S. The film, which chronicled the flier's trials as well as his triumphs, was extremely popular and successful. Leyda wrote: "The finished film conveys Kalatozov's excitement in the 'mere act of flying,' plus his sympathy with a hero whose temperament often got him into trouble." In 1942, Kalatozov became chief administrator of feature film production and directed *Kinokontsert k 25-letiyu Krasnoy Armii* (*The Cine-concert for the 25th Anniversary of the Red Army*, co-directed with Sergei Gerasimov and Efim Dzigan). During the war, he made one film, in collaboration with Sergei Gerasimov, *Nepobedimye* (*The Invincible*, 1943), which chronicled the defense of Stalingrad.

Kalatozov was chosen to serve as Russian consul in Los Angeles, where he reportedly worked to strengthen ties between Soviet and American filmmakers and to establish an exchange of films between the two countries. In a June 12, 1944 feature article, *Time* magazine described him in somewhat stereotypical terms:

*Kalatozov, an enigmatic, uncommunicative Soviet official, went about his business with mysterious and solemn placidity, abetted by the fact that he spoke no English when he arrived. He can now discuss the weather with some facility.*

*Last week Movieman Kalatozov was still politely uncommunicative but a two-hour grilling through an interpreter had elicited this information:*

*In ten months Kalatozov has seen some 120 movies, has shipped nine to Russia. The nine: Young Tom Edison, Bambi, The Little Foxes, Hurricane, The North Star, Der Fuehrer's Face, Saludos Amigos, Mission to Moscow, Sun Valley Serenade.*

*The five U.S. films most popular in Russia, according to Kalatozov, were In Old Chicago, 100 Men and a Girl, Great Waltz, Lady Hamilton, Mission to Moscow.*

*Kalatozov also said that Russia's favorite cinemactors are: Bette Davis, Charlie Chaplin, Spencer Tracy, Deanna Durbin, and Mickey Mouse.*

The director later wrote about his experiences in California in his book *Lico Gollivuda (Hollywood's Face, 1949)*.

Kalatozov returned to the USSR in 1944 and two years later became Deputy Minister of Cinematography, a post he kept until 1949. He finally returned to filmmaking the next year with *Zagovor obrechyonnikh (Conspiracy of the Doomed, 1950)*. The film deals with an imperialist conspiracy involving the Vatican and American intelligence operatives in an unnamed Eastern European communist country. According to historians Mira Liehm and Antonin J. Liehm, the plot was dictated by party resolutions and was "so blatant that it encountered opposition even among the governing circles in Eastern Europe."

Kalatozov followed with a modern satire, *Vernye druz'ja (Faithful Friends, 1954)* about three friends who band together to bypass the arcane Soviet bureaucracy (a film that could only appear in Soviet theaters a year after Stalin's death); *Vichri Vrazdebnye (Waves of Rancor, 1953)* on the life of Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky (a Russian Bolshevik leader and first chairman of the Cheka); and *Pervyj eselon (The First Echelon, 1956)*, a film about young settlers trying to work uncultivated lands.

It was on *The First Echelon* that Kalatozov first met one of his most valuable allies, cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky. Their first film together (with actress Tatiana Samoilova) *Letyat zhuravli (The Cranes are Flying, 1957)* was based on a play by Victor Rosov and became one of the most popular and influential Soviet films since the 1930s. This lyrical and passionate story of an affair between young lovers during wartime astonished film critics around the world. The film's bold camerawork and freedom of expression (including depictions of black marketers and draft dodgers in the USSR during World War II) marked a brief but splendid period in Soviet cinema. *The Cranes are Flying* went on to win the *Palme D'Or* as best film at the 1958 Cannes Film Festival.

Kalatozov, Urusevsky and Samoilova combined forces again in 1960 to make *Neotpravlennoe pis'mo (The Letter Never Sent)*, a story of four young geologists searching for diamonds in the taiga of Siberia. Its lunar-like landscapes, eerie foreboding light and sense of solitude and isolation anticipated (and perhaps influenced) the work of Andrei Tarkovsky. The Soviet hierarchy who had been hoping for another international success attacked Kalatozov. In an October 1962 conference in Italy, Mikhail Romm, the head of Kalatozov's production unit at Mosfilm (also known as the Art Council), stated his complaint against *The Letter Never Sent*. It should be noted that Romm's speech was also a defense against charges that the Art Council's sole purpose was the pre-censorship of its filmmakers. This is an important statement, because the attitude Romm expressed became the "official" dogma espoused by Soviet film historians and critics on all of Kalatozov's work.

*Kalatozov himself often asks the Council for a general discussion, and not only for discussion but for us to see the rushes before the film is finished ... I would like to mention here what happened in the Art Council's discussion on Kalatozov's film The Letter Never Sent. The Council criticized this film quite severely ... We said to Kalatozov that in this search for new approaches he had destroyed and suffocated the dramatic development of his characters. It seemed, in the last analysis, that he had cut man, with all his features, out of this film. Man, the characters, had a subordinate position; he had been superseded by the direction and the photography. We suggested to Kalatozov — and it is just this that the Art Council exists for — that he should correct this situation ... Kalatozov did not agree with the Art Council and did not think we were right.*

This vein of criticism persisted for decades — until the Telluride Film Festival's 1992 tribute to Kalatozov and later showings of *I am Cuba* at the 1993 San Francisco Film Festival. With the passing of time, Kalatozov's films are now seen as more modern in tone and technique than those of many of his contemporaries in world cinema are. *The Letter Never Sent* was an important influence on Francis Ford Coppola's work, especially the filming of *Apocalypse Now*.

At the time of *Ja Kuba/Soy Cuba (I am Cuba, 1964)*, Kalatozov was sixty-one years old. His appearance was a cross between that of a Soviet politburo official and that of a distinguished Italian actor nearing the end of his career. Well dressed, with a strong Romanesque nose, he looked like a successful businessman who was comfortably in control — not at all like a creative artist known for his whirling, feverish camera movement and esthetic unpredictability. *Soviet Film* (1968, volume 8), described him in admiring terms:

*In this rather taciturn man, who never raises his voice and sometimes seems rather phlegmatic, there is an unbelievable charge of emotion. It only takes a brief contact between the artist and his material, just a faint spark, for this charge to explode into a mighty blast ... He has a record of forty years work in films, yet he still keeps his colleagues and cinema audiences guessing.*

After *I am Cuba*, he spent several years in the preparation and shooting of *Krasnaya palatka (La Tenda Rosa/The Red Tent, 1970)*. Distributed in the United States by Paramount, *The Red Tent* was an Italian-Soviet production starring Sean Connery as Roald Amundsen and Peter Finch as Umberto Nobile in a re-creation of an ill-fated 1928 Arctic expedition — Nobile's exploration party was trapped and eventually rescued by a Russian team.

Kalatozov died in Moscow in 1973 at the age of sixty-nine after a long illness.

## **Sergei Urusevsky**

(1908- 1974)

Sergei Urusevsky started as a painter and photographer studying under the great graphic artist Vladimir Favorsky at the Institute of Fine Art in Moscow. Bringing a pictorial tradition to cinema, Urusevsky started his career with Mark Donskoi on *Selskaya uchitel'nitsa (The Village Schoolteacher, 1947)*, Vsevolod Pudovkin on *The Return of Vasili Bortnikov (1953)*, and Grigori Chukhari on *Sorok pervyi (The Forty-First, 1956)*. Urusevsky also served during World War II as a cameraman on the front lines.

With *The First Echelon* he combined his marvelous visual sense with Kalatozov's breathtaking technical skills — a partnership that made *The Cranes are Flying*, *The Letter Never Sent* and *I am Cuba* landmarks in the history of cinematography. Urusevsky and Yuri Ilyenko (cinematographer of *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* who also became a director) had profound influence throughout the Soviet film industry — not since the 1920s had Soviet film style been acclaimed throughout the world. His poetic camerawork, no matter how daring, was *always* an organic search into the emotional possibilities of the script. In 1969 Urusevsky directed *The*

*Ambler's Race*, adapted from the Kirghiz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov's short novel. Urusevsky followed this up with *Sing Your Song, Poet* (1971) based on the poems of Sergei Yesenin.

Urusevsky's other cinematography credits include *The Land of the Blue Mountains*, *Alitet Leaves for the Hills*, *Cavalier of the Golden Star*, and *Lesson of Life*.

Sergei Urusevsky, "On Form"  
from *Iskusstvo kino* Magazine, 1965  
translated by Nadia Kizenko, State University of New York at Albany

Cuba stunned us. This is an overwhelming revolution, an overwhelming country and people. We had to establish the genre and the form of our film accordingly ...

Say we, as foreigners, arrive in a country where we have never been and start trying to make a psychological drama or a novelistic treatment. We probably would not be able to do it. No foreigner could do it, because in order to make that kind of a film you need to really know all of your material in detail — the people, the way of life, their particular national qualities, and so on and so forth.

We saw the film as a kind of poem, as a poetic narrative. I am not saying that this is how it actually turned out! It is up to you to determine whether we were able to do it. but it did seem to us that with this genre we could solve the artistic task before us ... This kind of form does not require much detail of everyday life or exhaustive psychological description. But what did seem absolutely necessary to us was the creation of an image — to the point of hyperbole.

In the process of making the film there were these new laws that kept coming up, laws that are apparently inherent in this kind of narrative ... We tried to get to the point where the viewer would not be just a passive observer of events happening on the screen but would experience them with the actor — we wanted the viewers to be active participants in the events. And I, as a cameraman, always wanted to do more than simply fixate what was happening in front of the camera. I am interested in getting the basic theme of the scene: love, loathing, misery, joy, despair ...

Rhythm is key. Obviously when the cameraman is running alongside the heroes, first close to them, then approaching them again — peering into the face of one, then another, stumbling into trees, falling down — the panorama cannot be and ought not to be even. This technical 'failing' is in fact an artistic virtue. I should add that whatever episode we film, whatever camera we use, the vital condition is an inner agitation, a creative emotion during the filming — I even dare say inspiration.

Using a hand-held camera gives you the opportunity of making free, complicated panoramic pans which are impossible with a stationary camera with the usual cart on its tracks. This is not to say that I am agitating for every film to be shot with a manual camera. But when we tried shooting *I am Cuba* with a stationary camera and a tripod, it just didn't work — it was as if our hands dropped down by our sides ... it seems to me that if I move forward a bit, holding the camera in my hands, or back a bit, or shake the camera from side to side, the image becomes more expressive and more alive. We could not do without it.

It seems to us that you do not have to show the viewer literally everything on the screen. Not at all. There is always something that ought to be left unspoken. You have to give the viewer the chance to be more active, to figure out something for himself, to connect the dots ...

There is one more circumstance, which seems very important to me. In *I am Cuba* we decided to solve the social issue by way of association. Take the beginning of the film: before the subtitles

you already have the long pan along the shore, over the palm trees. We wanted to show the long island which we are approaching more and more slowly ... After the titles there is a pan over a poverty-stricken village. Black sky, white palms. The whole pan was shot from a boat. In the foreground you have a black boatman. The whole pan is shot around him — you see first his back, then his legs. (By the way, this pan is shot using a 9.8mm lens. The possibility of this lens still amazes me ...) I am convinced that the impression of poverty is not created so much by the poor village itself that we are passing by as by this boatman, whose bare back and legs we constantly see off to the side. At the end, the camera comes to a black woman with naked children crossing the river. They are the culmination of the pan. In the next sequence, taking the camera into the pool is justified because water is the visual link between the two scenes.

### **Yevgeny Aleksandrovich Yevtushenko**

(1933 - )

Famed poet Yevgeny Aleksandrovich Yevtushenko was first published in 1952 and soon became known as the most popular spokesman for a young generation of poets who refused to follow the dictates of the Stalinist era and its doctrine of social realism. In 1962, Yevtushenko published a series of poems which were to become milestones in his career: “Talk,” an indictment of Soviet hypocrisy, “Babi Yar,” protesting Soviet anti-Semitism and the horrors of the holocaust, and “Zima Junction,” an autobiographical work. Although always at odds with the Soviet government, it was the publication in Paris of his *Precocious Autobiography* (1963) that drew severe official censure. However, Yevtushenko’s enormous international popularity allowed him relative freedom to continue his work and travel abroad. In 1984 Yevtushenko began his second career, that of film director. His first film, *Kindergarten*, opened at Film Forum in New York City and his second, *Stalin’s Funeral*, premiered in 1993 at the Museum of Modern Art. Yevtushenko is currently teaching six months a year in the United States.

A recent overview of Yevtushenko’s work, *Collected Poems: 1952–1990* was recently published by Henry Holt. In 1995, he published his first novel, *Don’t Die Before You’re Dead* (Random House).

Film Credits: *I am Cuba* (1964, scriptwriter), *Take Off* (1973, actor), *Kindergarten* (1984, scriptwriter, director, actor), *Stalin’s Funeral* (1991, scriptwriter, director, actor), *Donna Quixote* (1995, work in progress for the BBC with Vanessa Redgrave).

### **Enrique Pineda Barnet**

(1933- )

Born in Havana, Enrique Pineda Barnet started his career as an actor in radio and theater. In 1953, he published his first novel, *Y más allá de la brisa* (*Beyond the Breeze*) which won the Hernández Catá National Literary Award. At the same time, he started writing for television and began to work in advertising (he found the latter to be a great way to get professional training). With the publication of his book *Siete cuentos para antes de un suicidio* (*Seven Stories for Before a Suicide*), Pineda Barnet met a group of young film buffs interested in adapting his novel to the screen. Among them was director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea.

Next Pineda Barnet returned to the theater with the Nuestro Tiempo Group and later the Studio Theater Group. In the theater, he developed his writing and directing skills. Even after the founding of ICAIC (the Cuban Film Institute) in 1959, Pineda Barnet chose not to join his film friends (including Gutiérrez Alea) but decided to stay in theater as a teacher for several years.

It was only in 1963 at the urging of Alfredo Guevara that Pineda Barnet joined ICAIC. At the same time that he was co-writing *I am Cuba*, Pineda Barnet started to direct some experimental short films and several documentaries. His first feature, *Giselle*, starring Alicia Alonso was an enormous success and is still in distribution in the U.S. (through New Yorker Films). Pineda

Barnet's 1989 feature, *La bella del Alhambra*, won a Goya Prize from the Spanish Cinema Arts Academy. Today, Pineda Barnet is one of the most respected directors in Cuban cinema.

Filmography: *Fuenteovejuna* (1963), *Cosmorama* (1964), *Giselle* (1964), *La Gran Piedra* (1965), *Aire frío* (1965), *David* (1967), *Rodeo* (1972), *Versos sencillos* (1972), *Nicolás Guillén n°2* (1972), *Mella* (1975), *Rostros del Báltico* (1977), *Aquella larga noche* (1979), *Tiempo de amar* (1983), *Ensayo romántico* (1985), *La bella del Alhambra* (1989).

### **Sergio Corrieri**

Sergio Corrieri (*Alberto*) is one of Cuba's most renowned actors, having also starred in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's acclaimed *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968). Since he last appeared on Cuban television almost ten years ago, Corrieri founded an avant-garde theater company, *Escambray*, up in the mountains. He is currently president of the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos.

### **Jean Bouise**

Jean Bouise (*Jim, the man with the crucifix fetish*) was the one actor in *I am Cuba* who would gain a worldwide reputation. Bouise was on vacation in Cuba during the making of the film and Kalatozov convinced him to play the important role of the American at the bar who picks up "Betty." He was later to become one of the most important stars in France during the 1960s, famous for his roles in Alain Resnais' *La Guerre est Finie*, Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist*, and Constantin Costa-Gavras' *Z*.

### **A Brief History of the Cuban Revolution**

On Sunday October 28, 1492, Christopher Columbus landed in Cuba and called it "the most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen." Still known as the "Pearl of the Antilles," Cuba was then populated by several different Amerindian groups. The Spanish conquest of Cuba started in 1511 under the leadership of Diego de Velázquez. As a major staging area for Spanish exploration of the Americas, Cuba was also a target for French and British pirates. The indigenous population of the island was quickly destroyed by disease and Spanish repression and the native American workforce was soon replaced by African slaves. The influx of the slaves, reaching its peak in 1817, had enormous impact on Cuba's cultural evolution.

The Cuban independence movement began in 1810 and erupted in 1868 as the fierce Ten Years War. Spain negotiated a peace with the islanders but none of the brokered reforms was carried out (although slavery was abolished in 1886). In 1895, a second revolution was launched, this time by the great writer and poet, José Martí. There was a strong support in the United States for Cuban independence (mostly because of the economic advantages a "free" Cuba would offer) and with the February 15, 1898 sinking of the U.S. battleship Maine in Havana harbor, the Spanish American War began. Spain capitulated on December 10, 1898 and the peace treaty established Cuban independence. But the U.S. Congress forced the Platt Amendment on the new country — keeping the island under U.S. "protection" and giving the government the right to "intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence."

American corporations quickly moved into Cuba and bought up many of the country's plantations, refineries, railroads and factories. A revolt in 1905 headed by José Miquel Gómez led to U.S. military occupation from 1906 to 1909 (future president William Howard Taft was one of the provisional governors during this period). The U.S. military evacuated the island in 1909 but returned in 1912 to assist in the suppression of black Cubans' protests against discrimination. During World War I, the destruction of European crops created a boom industry for sugar cane and Cuba reaped unexpected prosperity.

However this wartime boom was soon followed by a crash and poverty again swept the island. Fraudulent elections and corrupt politicians were the order of the day. Gerardo Machado,

president of Cuba from 1925 to 1933 began to make major changes and instituted projects for the poor. However, the early promise of his administration remained unfulfilled as Machado turned his energies to the suppression of his opponents — earning him the nickname, “The Butcher.” Machado was overthrown in 1933 by a military and student junta led by a former army sergeant, Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar (1901-1973).

The election in the U.S. of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, inaugurated a new era in U.S.-Cuban diplomacy. Sumner Welles was brought in as ambassador to Cuba, the Platt Amendment was overturned, the sugar quota was revised and tariffs to the United States were changed to favor Cuba. Still, Batista was referred to as “the second most important man in Cuba, behind the American ambassador,” as U.S. ownership of much of Cuba and the island’s dire poverty persisted. In 1944 a sight seldom witnessed in Latin American politics of the time occurred: Batista lost the presidential election to a democratically elected rival and stepped down peacefully. He left shortly for the U.S. and stayed there for the next five years. There was a brief surge of relative political freedom and economic prosperity (the latter caused by the sugar cane boom after World War II). Then on March 10, 1952, shortly before new elections were scheduled, Batista seized power through a military coup.

Batista’s reign this time was marked by brutal repression, increasing investment by the American Mafia in Havana casinos, and the influx of fun-seeking foreign businessmen. One hundred and thirty-four Cuban liberals soon fomented a revolt against the military dictatorship. On July 26, 1953, an attack led by the 25-year-old lawyer, Fidel Castro, on the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba ended in disaster. Some of the rebels were killed in the attack; others were captured, horribly tortured and murdered. Castro was pursued by Batista’s army and was discovered asleep in a shack in the nearby foothills by Lieutenant Pedro Sarría — luckily, an acquaintance from college. Castro’s life was spared and he was sentenced to prison for two years. But the stories of the brutal murders of the rebels could not be suppressed. The anger of the people had been aroused and Castro’s fame began to grow.

On his release, Castro left Cuba for Mexico where he rallied his forces and created the 26th of July Movement. In December 1956, Castro and 11 of his revolutionary comrades (including his brother Raúl Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara), landed in Cuba by boat. They survived a disastrous initial military encounter and took up positions in the Sierra Maestra — rugged mountains in the easternmost province of Oriente that Castro knew well since his childhood. The United States withdrew military aid in 1958 forcing Batista to flee the country for the Dominican Republic. On January 1, 1959, Castro and his forces came down from the mountains and marched the next day into Havana to take control.

Brilliant, charismatic and sometimes ruthless, Castro attempted many reforms to aid Cuba’s poor. In 1961, the expropriation of U.S. land holdings in Cuba led to the end of diplomatic relations between the two countries and later that year, Castro declared allegiance to the Eastern bloc (and to Marxist-Leninism). Opposition to this Communist alignment led the U.S. to impose a trade embargo and to attempt an invasion at the Bay of Pigs (Baía de Cochinos) — a total military failure. In a dramatic October 1962 confrontation, the United States forced a showdown with the Soviet Union over the deployment Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba. The United States imposed a naval blockade of the island and on October 24, Russian ships carrying missiles were turned back by the U.S. Navy. The Cuban missile crisis lasted from October 22 to October 28 when Nikita Krushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles. The blockade ended a month later on November 20. Only a month after the blockade was lifted, *I am Cuba* was begun.

Political and social repression remained (and still remain) in varying degrees after Castro’s takeover in 1959. However, with Soviet financial assistance, many social programs including health and education benefits were adopted. Unfortunately, the comparisons that can be drawn between *I am Cuba* and Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* can also be made between the

Soviet and Cuban revolutions. In fact, the optimism Sergei Eisenstein felt in 1925 about the end of czarist rule was matched by the emotions that Kalatozov and his crew felt in 1964 about overthrow of Batista. With the “liberalization” of the Soviet hierarchy in the late 1980s and then its final collapse, great hardships again face the Cuban populace.

### From “**The Soviet Film Today**”

by Steven P. Hill, *Film Quarterly*, Summer 1967

It will not be easy to surpass what strikes me as the most brilliant Soviet film since the 1920's: Mikhail Kalatozov's artistically incredible, thematically controversial, financially disastrous *I Am Cuba*, a 1964 co-production made in Cuba, co-written by Yevtushenko, photographed by Urusevsky. In this picture Kalatozov and Urusevsky have far surpassed their epoch-making camera innovations of *Cranes are Flying* and *The Letter Never Sent*, and have realized Eisenstein's dream, which he was trying for in his abortive Mexican film — to give an extremely dynamic, emotional, epic picture of the revolutionary struggle of oppressed Latin American masses, using visual images and no dialogue ... A year before Yutkevich's more publicized experiment with narrated dialogue in *Lenin in Poland*, Kalatozov and Yevtushenko made *I Am Cuba* virtually silent, with dramatic music, natural sound, and bits of Yevtushenko's impressionistic poetry introducing each episode and connecting them together. The film also harks back to Eisenstein's silent classics like *Potemkin* and *Strike* and to Kalatozov's own 1930 ethnographic masterpiece *Salt for Svanetia*, in showing a generalized, impersonal mass hero consisting of nonactor types rather than individual characters, in the stylized sort of persuasive, emotional, epic melodrama once known as “agitprop” — before it was rejected by Stalin in favor of prosaic, sentimental, conformist “social realism” in the middle 1930s.

Kalatozov and Urusevsky have applied their technique of the “emotional camera” to an extent which has to be seen to be believed, with moving camera and handheld camera (Urusevsky ends one unforgettable scene swimming underwater), wide-angle (9.8mm) lenses, oddly tilted angles which distort the characters' images and give the whole picture a very distinctive form, and some elaborate crane shots — especially one traveling up inside a skyscraper across the roof and then flying out over the street below — which in engineering complexity probably equal anything done by the Germans in the 1920's ...

From the standpoint of content, the film met a rather cold reception in Cuba and Eastern Europe because of an obvious emphasis on art for art's sake, and because it concentrates with barely concealed fascination on the miseries of poor Cubans under Batista. But, after all, such topics as crime, suffering, police brutality, perversions, student demonstrations, a burning field of sugar cane, and violent death under a bourgeois regime can be stimulating — a cinematic — for a filmmaker, more so perhaps than the regimented society and dull life to be found under some other government systems ... Because of two anti-American elements, this film may not find American distribution.

### **Statement on *I am Cuba***

by David E. Nachman

Attorney in New York and consultant to Human Rights Watch/Americas

All films are products of their times. Some, though, manage to transcend their origins and speak to future generations with immediacy and undiminished relevance, while others remain captive to the particular outlook of their creators, and can be seen today only as artifacts of conditions as they existed at the moment of their making. On the aesthetic and psychological levels, “Soy Cuba” (*I am Cuba*), this extraordinary joint Soviet-Cuban homage to the Cuban Revolution produced in 1964, belongs firmly in the transcendent camp. Through a series of urban and rural scenes shot in high-contrast black and white, with close, off-angle camera attention to the protagonists of its story, and aided by an excellent score drawn from the diverse Cuban musical lexicon of the day, “Soy Cuba” creates an enduring sensory impression of the outer topography of Cuba and the inner geography of the island's people — from the sophistication of nightlife

Habaneros, to the honest industriousness of the city's artisan class, to the grace and determination with which Cuban peasants have traditionally confronted a life dominated by the hardships of growing and cutting cane.

The passage of time has been less kind, however, to the message of revolutionary enthusiasm that "Soy Cuba" proclaims with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. There is no denying, of course, the reality of the injustices and excesses of the Batista regime that are depicted here — farmers *were* subject to the whim of their not-always-benevolent absentee landlords, peaceful student and worker protest *was* met with indiscriminate fire by a repressive and increasingly corrupt police force, the Cuban army *did* respond to Castro's forces' gains in the countryside by bombing villages that posed no military threat, and the resources of the country (including its land and countless women) *were* placed at the service of foreign interests, personified in this film by the U.S. Sugar Corporation, American sailors, and caricatured Jewish businessmen/gangsters. Indeed, many of the abuses chronicled in "Soy Cuba" were equally the mark of a number of Latin American countries during the past decades, and they provided the impetus for a regional rebel movement that looked to the Cuban revolution for inspiration.

What ultimately makes "Soy Cuba" a political and historical relic, however, is the failed promise of the revolution it so unabashedly celebrates. The prospect of mass political empowerment suggested by the film has been replaced by a regime that demands unquestioning popular support but is ever less able to obtain it; the hope of material advancement has been dashed on the rocks of a centrally planned economy which, shorn of its Soviet support, is incapable of providing the most basic needs of the Cuban population; and the film's vision of an autonomous insular culture free of foreign domination has been substantially eroded as the Cuban government, starved for foreign currency, freely encourages tourism and foreign investment and openly tolerates their less attractive by-products, including even child prostitution. Watching this film is a sad lesson in irony. At various points, revolutionary fighters are heard to say "Liberty or Death." Today, those words would serve as a rallying cry only for those Cuban "balseros" who, to escape the lack of democratic and economic freedoms at home, choose to risk death at sea.

"Soy Cuba" simply could not be made today — the energy is gone, and so too are the great hopes of the revolution. As a window onto another, more optimistic time, however, "Soy Cuba" provides a beautiful and bittersweet experience.

### **Milestone Film & Video**

Milestone was founded in 1990 by Amy Heller and Dennis Doros to bring out the best films of yesterday and today. Milestone's re-releases include restored versions of Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers*, Murnau's *Tabu* and *The Last Laugh*, Cooper and Schoedsack's *Grass and Chang*, Antonioni's *Red Desert*, and Buñuel's *The Young One*. Among its new releases are the films of artist Eleanor Antin, the documentaries of feature filmmaker Philip Haas, Wim Wenders' *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, Bae Yong-kyun's *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?*, and Luc Besson's *Atlantis*. Milestone, however, is primarily known for acquiring and distributing unknown "classics" that have never been distributed in the US and Canada including such films as Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, a series of twenty-eight films from the early Russian cinema (1908–1919), Mikhail Kalatozov's *I am Cuba* and next, Jane Campion's first feature film, *Two Friends*.

Special thanks to Edith Kramer, Nancy Goldman and the Pacific Film Archive;  
Alexander Calzatti, Stephen P. Hill; Nadia Kizenko; Anita Monga; Peter Moore;  
Scott Eyman; Lynn Kalber; Eleanor Nichols; Steve Siers;  
Isabel Cadalso; David Basson; Meritxell Sitjà;  
Bill Pence and the Telluride Film Festival;  
Tom Luddy and American Zoetrope;  
Raffaele Donato, Margaret Bodde and Kent Jones of Cappa Productions;

Sandra Levinson and the Center for Cuban Studies.

*I Am Cuba* is a release by  
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