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### Monumental Melodrama: Mikhail Kalatozov's Retrospective Return to 1920s Agitprop Cinema in *I Am Cuba*

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“Monumental Melodrama: Mikhail Kalatozov’s Retrospective Return to 1920s Agitprop Cinema in *I Am Cuba*”

October 2013

Few artists have bridged the large thirty-year divide between the early Soviet avant-garde period of the 1920s and the post-Stalinist Thaw of the late 1950s and early 1960s like the filmmaker Mikhail Kalatozov. Thriving in these two periods of relative artistic freedom and innovation for Soviet culture, the Georgian-born Kalatozov—originally Kalatozishvili—creatively merged the ideological with the kinesthetic, first through his constructivist-inspired silent work and then through his celebrated Thaw-era films. Having participated in the bold experiment that was early Soviet cinema, Kalatozov subsequently maintained some semblance of cinematic productivity under Stalinism; but then in the late 1950s he suddenly transformed himself and his cinematic vision. And what a transformation it was for Kalatozov, as the acrobatic camerawork and heart wrenching wartime drama of *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*) gained him world renown (and a Palme d’Or at Cannes) in 1958, before his *A Letter Never Sent* (*Neotpravlennoe pis'mo*, 1960) and *I Am Cuba* (*Ia Kuba*, 1964) solidified his reputation for highly inventive, often dizzying cinematography (thanks in part to his celebrated cameraman Sergei Urusevsky). It was through these films, in fact, that Kalatozov helped reinvigorate Soviet cinema, which had remained relatively dormant in the years immediately following World War II but sprung to life with the so-called Thaw, as the country’s artistic restrictions lessened appreciably under Nikita Khrushchev.

Although working some thirty years after his impressive start in the waning years of the silent era, Kalatozov maintained significant ties to this earliest and extremely fertile period of Soviet cinema, when Soviet cinema leaped to the forefront of filmmaking innovation. Even a cursory look at Kalatozov's later films reveals a distinctively silent-era sensibility and, in particular, a use of image, emotion, and sound that had its kinesthetic roots in what were the melodramatic chords and agitational fervor of the 1920s silent era. By focusing on Kalatozov's later films, most notably *I Am Cuba*, an epic look at the Cuban revolution that has received surprisingly little scholarly attention, I will argue in this article that throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s Kalatozov aggressively revived the experimental spirit of silent Soviet cinema.<sup>1</sup> In *I Am Cuba*, most notably, Kalatozov returned to the melodramatic agitprop and revolutionary monumentality of the early Soviet silent period—particularly that produced by Sergei Eisenstein—and of his own youth. Replicating the powerful avant-garde mélange of mass propaganda and cinematic innovation within the more contemporary context of the 1960s, Kalatozov used melodrama's exaggerated pathos and unabashed appeal to the emotions to usher in a celebration of silent film that conceptually strove to recreate the profound visual effect that had made silent cinema such an effective vehicle for propaganda. *I Am Cuba*, in this light, emerges as a paean of sorts to the silent era, melodrama, and Kalatozov's impressive cinematic lineage.

Melodrama, it should be emphasized, flourished during the silent film era. As Thomas Elsaesser has explained in his extensive discussion of cinema's impulse toward melodrama,

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<sup>1</sup> One of the few scholars in the West to make any explicit mention of the connection between Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba* and silent cinema is Steven Hill, who wrote about Soviet cinema in the late 1960s. Hill, however, does not emphasize the melodramatic nature of the film. See Steven Hill, "The Soviet Film Today," *Film Quarterly*, 20/4 (Summer 1967), pp. 51-52. In the Soviet Union, meanwhile, A. Golovnia remarks on the film's "revolutionary pathos that was characteristic of the silent period" in a discussion of *I Am Cuba* that appeared in 1965 on the pages of *Iskusstvo kino* (*The Art of Cinema*), the foremost Soviet publication on cinema. See A. Golovnia, "Ia – Kuba," *Iskusstvo Kino* 3 (1965): 24.

silent films inherently tended toward the melodramatic due to the medium's complete lack of live dialogue and repeated use of piano accompaniment for dramatic emphasis.<sup>2</sup> The term melodrama, in fact, originally signified a drama accompanied by music; hence, the piano accompaniment of silent films often generated a distinctly melodramatic aesthetic, a sensibility replete with overwrought emotion and heart wrenching narrative turns. Silent filmmakers—from D.W. Griffith to Evgenii Bauer to Vsevolod Pudovkin—would develop melodramatic styles and plots to offset the inherent muteness of the medium, whereby silent melodramatic epics, with their distinct moral clarity and unabashed elicitation of its audience's indignation toward injustice, emerged as one of the most prevalent genres in film industries as diverse as Hollywood and Soviet Russia.

Once silent Soviet cinema took shape in the 1920s, melodrama presented a convenient means for attracting and influencing large, diverse audiences, as both mainstream and more experimental filmmakers appealed to their viewers' visceral desire for revolutionary justice. Mirroring the prevailing trends in early Soviet theater, heroic melodrama allowed for politically relevant ideology as well as innovative aesthetics in the country's burgeoning film industry. "The melodramatic form is the best form for cinema," Lunacharsky declared in 1924, for it could explicitly promote "revolutionary heroes, arousing the sympathy and the pride of the revolutionary classes."<sup>3</sup> Despite its often exaggerated tug at the emotions, melodrama could be expediently fashioned by early Soviet artists as agitprop—a variation on the short propagandistic films, *agitki*, that appeared immediately after the 1917 Revolution—to spread lofty socialist ideals and revolutionary propaganda. And once the western-leaning New Economic Policy

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Imitations of Life. A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1991), p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Anatoli Lunacharsky, "Revolutionary Ideology and Cinema – Theses," in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds. *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 109.

(NEP) came into existence and films began to flow more freely into the country from the United States and Western Europe, Soviet filmmakers were compelled to turn to Hollywood for its admittedly manipulative, bourgeois mode of melodramatic storytelling that they could now use, in the words of Aleksandr Krinitsky (head of the Party Agitprop Department in the late 1920s), as “a weapon for the organization of the masses around the task of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and socialist construction.”<sup>4</sup> The Soviet government’s Agitprop Department increasingly aspired to make cinema “intelligible to the millions” and also entertaining, and thus these goals even warranted emulation of the West’s manipulative, bourgeois mode of melodramatic storytelling, all in the name of supporting the fledgling government and the ideals of the Revolution. Hence, a wide range of early Soviet filmmakers—Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, Fridrikh Ermler, among others—strove to use melodramatic plot lines as a means for prompting Soviet moviegoers to participate vicariously in the revolutionary struggle of socialism. Although Kalatozov’s own work in the silent era proved more ethnographic than overtly melodramatic, the revolutionary ideals of the early Soviet era and their propagation through melodramatic narrative profoundly informed the Georgian-born filmmaker’s artistic ethos.

Having emerged at the tail end of the silent era as a cameraman and documentary maker, Kalatozov established himself with two remarkable propagandistic films: the 1930 *Salt for Svanetia* (*Sol’ Svanetii*), one of the more innovative documentaries from the avant-garde era, and *Nail in the Boot* (*Gvozd’ v sapoge*), somewhat lesser known agitprop from 1931 that was quickly banned for its controversial depiction of a mock show trial for a soldier tripped up by a sharp nail during a military exercise. In *Salt for Svanetia*, Kalatozov’s reliance on low-angle constructivist shots of the landscape accompanies an ethnographic glimpse into the hardships of the people in

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Taylor and Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*, p. 207.

the outlying region of Svanetia, a harsh mountainous region now part of Georgia, as the film's emphasis on bold Soviet solutions to draught, famine, and rampant mortality suggest that melodrama always remained in Kalatozov's sights. The destitute people of Svanetia tragically suffer, and it is only Soviet power and its socialist ingenuity and industrial know-how that can alleviate—and implicitly eradicate—the grief and heart-wrenching misery found in this unforgiving mountainous region. And also implicit in *Salt for Svanetia* is the idea that Soviet cinema itself can help alleviate the grief and rampant destitution so vividly on display in this film.

After the quick passing of the silent era and emergence of sound, which roughly coincided with the rise of Stalinism and socialist realism as an aesthetic ideology, Kalatozov carefully progressed in his career within the Soviet film industry. Having spent considerable time in Hollywood during the 1940s as the Soviet film industry's representative to the U.S., Kalatozov soon began honing his melodramatic touch under the watchful eye of Stalin and within the rigid framework of socialist realism.<sup>5</sup> During the Stalinist and post-Stalinist era, Kalatozov directed a handful of films that tacked closely—and safely—to the basic tenets of socialist realism but also pulled at viewers' emotions to varying degrees of success. These Kalatozov films from the Stalinist and early post-Stalinist era include *Wings of Victory* (*Valerii Chkalov*, 1941), *The Conspiracy of the Doomed* (*Zagovor obrechennykh*, 1950), and *The First Echelon* (*Pervyi eshelon*, 1957), all of which reflected the political pressures of their day and only sporadically showcased the cinematic brilliance of Kalatozov's subsequent films. And as a

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<sup>5</sup> As head of the Soviet department “Glavnoe upravlenie po proizvodstvu khudozhestvennykh fil'mov,” which was a section within the Ministry of Cinematography (or “Komitet po delam kinematografii,” as it was known before 1946), Kalatozov oversaw the production of fiction features. When the “Komitet po delam kinematografii” was renamed the Ministry of Cinematography, Kalatozov became deputy minister for the production of fictional feature films. He held this governmental post between 1944 and 1948.

conspicuous reflection of Kalatozov's effectiveness as a filmmaker, in 1951 the Georgian-born filmmaker in fact received the prestigious (at least at this time) Stalin Prize.

Whereas Kalatozov's work from the late Stalinist period and the years immediately following Stalin's death adhered to a conventionality and relatively static film aesthetic endemic at the time, his subsequent Thaw films signaled a move back to the innovative techniques of the early 1930s, as all the rapid editing, sharp camera angles, and sudden shift away from color back to black and white accentuated Kalatozov's implicit return to his silent-era roots. Both Kalatozov's *Cranes are Flying* and *I Am Cuba* (and, to a lesser extent, *A Letter Never Sent*), in fact, merge avant-garde-inspired camerawork and melodrama, but in divergent ways with somewhat different melodramatic emphasis. The emotional core of *The Cranes are Flying*, for instance, stems from a form of melodrama that emerged in WWII-era cinema, an argument Aleksandr Prokhorov underscores in his insightful discussion of Kalatozov's famous film.<sup>6</sup> *The Cranes are Flying*, Prokhorov argues, is undeniably the work of a filmmaker grappling with the legacy of socialist realism and the Stalinist era. And as Prokhorov also contends, Kalatozov uses melodrama in *The Cranes are Flying* to expand and reinvent the family melodramas Stalin endorsed and promoted during World War II: "Kalatozov's melodrama reconfigured the war trope inherited from Stalinism, transforming the ideological confrontation between 'us' and 'them' into a conflict between the female protagonist and the war equated with familial 'us.'"<sup>7</sup> The Soviet tradition of wartime melodrama and its emphasis on black and white conflict undoubtedly prove salient to and inform Kalatozov's 1958 film.

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<sup>6</sup> Aleksander Prokhorov, "Soviet Family Melodrama of the 1940s and 1950s: From Wait for Me to *The Cranes are Flying*," in *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, ed. Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002): pp. 208-231.

<sup>7</sup> Prokhorov, p. 213.

What Prokhorov fails to emphasize, however, is that *The Cranes are Flying* simultaneously reconfigures the filmmaker's 1920s sensibility, particularly through the virtually silent presence of the film's heroine Veronika and a variety of melodramatic sequences that seem straight out of the silent era, for instance Veronika's rape at the hands of the piano-playing Mark while German bombs simultaneously drop onto their Moscow apartment building, as well as her subsequent attempt at suicide along a railroad line that visually resurrects Vertov's highly kinesthetic, avant-garde editing practices. When Veronika eventually rescues a young boy on a street, as if saving herself in the process, it is Eisensteinian overlapping that accentuates—and prolongs—the heroine's frantic run to rescue the boy before an oncoming truck. Moreover, a multitude of low-angle constructivist-inspired shots, so reminiscent of imagery from *Salt for Svanetia*, permeate the film in a way that clearly shows the lasting impact of the early Soviet silent film aesthetic on Kalatozov's later films.

In Kalatozov's next film, the Siberian expedition film *A Letter Never Sent*, a silent-era aesthetic and a conspicuous dose of melodrama similarly prevail, albeit alongside highly impressive cinematography that vividly captures the unforgiving harshness of the Siberian landscape before which the film's harrowing plot unfolds. This focus on this harsh natural environment, reminiscent of Kalatozov's focus on the mountainous region in *Salt for Svanetiia* and subsequent focus on the Cuban countryside in *I Am Cuba* (as well as his look at the frozen Arctic region in his final film, the international co-production *The Red Tent* [Krasnaia palatka, 1969]), offers the filmmaker and his cinematographer Urusevsky to do away with unnecessary dialogue and show humans participating in an often tragic battle against the remorseless natural elements. As film scholar Dina Iordanova suggests, "Kalatozov had a special attraction to



depictions of standoffs between man and nature.”<sup>8</sup> In *A Letter Never Sent*, in particular, it is the unforgiving natural landscape that serves as a highly conspicuous backdrop to film’s impressive cinematography yet uneven melodramatic plot: a team of geologists, two of them and their guide initially involved in a complicated love triangle, find themselves trapped in the Siberian taiga without any supplies and without any feasible method of escape. The geologists must demonstrate their undying commitment to their scientific and socialist cause. In promoting the heroic work of Soviet scientists, the film suggests that filmmakers’ work offers a comparable heroism, particularly if done in challenging locales like Siberia (or Cuba). Urusevsky’s innovative cinematography may overshadow the melodramatic romantic plot that develops in the first half of the film, but the film clearly hearkened back to the silent era when experimentation in Soviet cinema could go hand in hand with melodramatic plots, bold propaganda, and unabashed idealism.

*I Am Cuba*, meanwhile, would go considerably further than *The Cranes are Flying* and *A Letter Never Sent* in reviving avant-garde, agitprop-inspired melodrama of the 1920s. In a manner that thematically and often conceptually emulates silent Soviet propaganda of the 1920s, revolutionary melodramatic “attractions” provide the basis for the hyperbolic message of *I Am Cuba* and its undeniably creative camera work. The film, however, quickly ran up against harsh criticism in the Soviet Union upon its release in 1964 and was subsequent shelved, a negative reception that undoubtedly points to the difficulties many had interpreting and emotionally processing the silent-era spirit of propaganda and experimentation underscoring the film. Although the initial critical reaction to Kalatozov’s film was mixed in the Soviet Union (“For me,” wrote one critic in an ominous tone typical for the time, “it is personally very sad that the film *I Am Cuba* did not rise to the political and artistic heights that we expected from it, and it

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<sup>8</sup> Dina Iordanova, “Refining Fire,” *Neotpravlennoe pis'mo: Letter Never Sent*, DVD liner notes, Irvington, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2012, 1959.

should serve as food for thought for the creators of the film”), the criticism quickly shifted to something even harsher, as the film became politically unviable in a Soviet Union that had shifted away from the Thaw to a more repressive, rigid attitude toward the arts and artistic innovation under Leonid Brezhnev.<sup>9</sup>

Despite directing his film more than three decades after the emergence of sound in cinema, Kalatozov conspicuously fashioned *I Am Cuba* as a silent work. While music abounds, relatively little live dialogue can be found in the film, save a smattering of political discussions and stilted conversations between Spanish-speaking prostitutes and English-speaking tourists. Instead, a lyrical narrative penned by the Soviet poet Evgenii Evtushenko accompanies the film’s vivid, poetic imagery that frames various melodramatic events surrounding the Cuban revolution that transpired between 1953 and 1959. Throughout the film, the various characters who find themselves caught up in the overthrow of Cuban President Fulgencio Batista and the simultaneous emergence of Fidel Castro remain practically mute, uttering words only sparingly and in a way that seems more akin to emphatic silent intertitles than live dialogue. In fact, it often song—the rhythms of the pre-Castro Havana nightlife scene and the street—that predominates, as if to provide musical accompaniment to the otherwise silent scenes of social injustice. All utterances, moreover, seem secondary to and slightly detached from Kalatozov and Urusevsky’s dizzying array of images. Even in the film’s most violent scenes of revolution, silence prevails, with no natural sound audible, save the eerie strumming of a guitar, the gushing of water coming out of hoses, or the chilling crack of a pistol firing. By playing so intentionally with sound and rendering it secondary to the film’s impressive cinematography, Kalatozov not only evokes the spirit of 1920s silent cinema but also lends a melodramatic focus to Cuba’s

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<sup>9</sup> G. Karpalov, “Novye fil’mu. *Ia kuba*,” *Iskusstvo Kino* 3 (1965): 32.

revolutionary history, as he dramatically amplifies the bloody events implicitly leading to Batista's sudden downfall and Castro's dramatic rise to power.

The action of *I Am Cuba*, which is divided into four distinct stories that are only tangentially linked, continually shifts from scenes of violence to scenes of tranquility and peace, and vice versa, all in a manner quite characteristic of melodrama. Take, for instance, the opening shots of the film that unexpectedly shift, by means of a typical Kalatozov jump-cut, from a quiet natural scene on a river flowing through lush jungle to the urban landscape and raucous music accompanying a beauty pageant atop a building in pre-Castro Havana. This slightly grotesque, decadent scene—a not-so-subtle bow to Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* that notably ends with the handheld camera submerged in a rooftop swimming pool—presages in visually stark terms the melodramatic plot shifts that will subsequently ensue in the film. Kalatozov and Urusevsky accentuate the melodrama by frequently cutting between glowing white shots of the Cuban landscape, the result of a halation effect created with black and white infrared film, to shadowy, dutch-angled shots of Havana's seedy pre-Castro nightlife. Just as the conspicuous shifts in narrative vividly accentuate the melodrama, the distinct, arguably excessive camera work and expressionistic cinematography contribute to the exaggerated emotion of melodrama, thus providing an appropriate visual equivalent. Urusevsky's camera work (done primarily with a handheld Éclair camera), much like the earlier Kalatozov-Urusevsky collaboration on *The Cranes are Flying* and *A Letter Never Sent*, visually captures the emotional extremes essential to melodrama.

In all four stories of *I Am Cuba* a pronounced aura of melodramatic tragedy emerges: in part one, the debasement of the Cuban prostitute Betty at the hands of American tourists; in part two, the fiery demise of a poor sugar cane farmer who must relinquish his hard-earned land to the United Fruit Company; in part three, the violent death of Enrique, a middle-class

revolutionary who saves a young Cuban woman from American sailors prior to leading protests against Batista on the streets of Havana that results in his bloody end before the feet of a reactionary police chief; and finally in part four, the revolutionary transformation of a pacifist peasant who loses his home and child to Batista's bombs before joining Castro's army. In all four of these stories plot lines contrasts and shifts abound. Kalatozov repeatedly accentuates heart-wrenching swings in the plot, thus bolstering the melodrama and reflecting explicit attributes of silent melodrama from 1920s Soviet culture. As Daniel Gerould, describing Russian formalist definitions of melodrama from the 1920s, explains: "In plot structure and narrative development, each phase [of melodrama] is followed by what appears to be an entirely new phase in relation to what went before, or at least by an entirely new degree of expressiveness. In this way the spectator's emotions are constantly held at a high point of tension."<sup>10</sup> The four plot lines of *I Am Cuba* succeed to varying degrees in conveying this tension, while the stories—modeled, in fact, after the five sections of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin*, 1925); indeed, Kalatozov had originally intended for *I Am Cuba* to have five parts à la Eisenstein (whose unfinished 1932 *Que Viva Mexico!*, for all intents and purposes a silent film, likewise featured a story of revolution broken down into four distinct narrative parts).<sup>11</sup> Such overt homage betrays Kalatozov's adherence to a 1920s model of revolutionary romanticism, or what has often been referred to as epic monumentality, which was partially based upon the principles of melodrama.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Gerould, "Russian Formalist Theories of Melodrama," in *Imitations of Life. A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> According to various sources, Kalatozov had his screenplay writers for *I Am Cuba* (most notably, Enrique Pineda Barnet) watch the surviving rushes from *Que Viva Mexico!* as they prepared to make *I Am Cuba*. See Lúcia Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2011), p. 133. *Que Viva Mexico!* was to have four parts, plus a prologue and epilogue, but the fourth part—about the revolutionary movement of Emiliano Zapata—remained unfinished.

Much akin to Eisenstein, Kalatozov presents heroic, yet monochromatic characters caught in the throes of revolution. The various characters who appear in the four stories of *I Am Cuba*—American tourists, the pious yet fallen woman “Betty,” a poor sugar cane farmer, Enrique, his comrade Alberto, and the poor pacifist farmer—prove one-dimensional at best. Rather than materializing as full-fledged characters, they serve as foils for the revolutionary message and, in particular, its melodrama, supporting Gerould’s contention that “characters in melodrama are devoid of individuality, either personal or everyday realistic; they are interesting to the spectator, not in themselves.”<sup>12</sup> Like characters in a silent film, they ultimately prove unable to express nuance as their often silent actions and the overwrought predicaments they find themselves in propel the melodramatic narrative forward. Moreover, the early Soviet cinema practice of *typage*—or visually stereotyped characters—permeates so much of *I Am Cuba*: be it the Americans in the nightclub drawing straws to see who gets which prostitute, the brash American sailors who accost the young, innocent Cuban woman Gloria, or the fat Cuban police chief who brutally shoots down Enrique, *typage* facilitates Kalatozov’s use of his characters as props, or agitprops, one might suppose.

A crucial moment of social stridency and heroic melodrama in *I Am Cuba* comes toward the end of the third story line, when Enrique leads a crowd of young Cubans down the steps of the University toward police troops who proceed to fire up at the defenseless protesters. An homage to Eisenstein and his Odessa Steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin*, this scene exemplifies the 1920s roots of the film, drawing as it so obviously does on Eisenstein’s histrionic clash of good and bad against the backdrop of revolution, before shifting to the oppressive spray of hoses aimed at the protesters that explicitly evokes a similar scene of water-based oppression from Eisenstein’s 1924 *Strike (Stachka)*, in which a factory’s owners call in the fire department

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<sup>12</sup> Gerould, p. 126.

to hose down the striking workers. These distinct melodramatic “attractions,” borrowed from Eisenstein, endow the film with a stylized sense of melodrama and a sense that Kalatozov is “revealing the device,” exposing his melodrama and propaganda for all to see. And it is in the ensuing action that Enrique falls victim to the police, thus becoming a martyr to the revolutionary cause, a point that Kalatozov amplifies by staging Enrique’s public funeral in all its glory and in a manner that replicates the funeral of the fallen sailor Vakulinchuk from *Battleship Potemkin* as well as a funeral sequence from the beginning of Eisenstein’s unfinished 1932 film *Que Viva Mexico!* (for all practical matters a silent film, albeit an incomplete one). The slow, silent procession of Cubans through the streets of Havana clearly mirrors the slow march of Odessa’s citizens past the tent on the Black Sea pier where Vakulinchuk’s body lies in *Potemkin*.

In the Enrique funeral scene Kalatozov, it should be emphasized, has evoked the dirge-like flow of Eisenstein’s Odessa funeral procession and its reliance on tonal montage (editing that amplifies the implicit emotion in a series of shots), using it as inspiration for what is arguably the most powerful and cinematically impressive scene in *I Am Cuba*. In this memorable sequence, the lengthy traveling shot, which lasts an impressive two and a half minutes and is facilitated by a complex use of a crane and then wires that move the camera through a cigar factory, over the Cuban masses mourning for Enrique and between several building tops with the city street below without a single cut, epitomizes Kalatozov’s and Urusevsky’s merging of technology, ideology, and overwrought emotion. The camerawork and revolutionary sentiment go hand in hand, as Kalatozov creates a 1960s equivalent of Eisenstein’s monumental propaganda and melodrama to fit the tumultuous Cuban backdrop. The cinematography may visually overwhelm the political message, but the intent is clearly for the

filmmaking to be revolutionary in its own special fashion while dramatically hearkening back to the 1920s.

Other scenes from *I Am Cuba* likewise amplify the melodrama alongside impressive camera work and, simultaneously, a conscious nod to the silent era (and, as often is the case throughout the film, Eisenstein's unfinished *Que Viva Mexico!*). Take, for instance, the scene in which a poor farmer frantically hacks down the sugar cane he has long toiled to grow on land now being cruelly repossessed by the United Fruit Company. Visually evocative of Eisenstein's unfinished ode to Mexican revolution, the sequence highlights the tragic demise of this poor farmer as well as the farmer's obstinate refusal to be exploited by the international conglomerate of the United Fruit Company. Fronds of sugar cane, evocative of palm trees from *Que Viva Mexico!*, sparkle thanks to the halation effect of Kalatozov's infrared film, while flames and smoke ultimately swallow up the farmer. Or consider the final narrative section of the film, when a peasant loses his simple mountainside home—as well as a child—to bombs dropped by Batista's forces: with the sound of airplanes ominously interrupting the silence on the mountainside, the wife and husband silently stare up at the sky. Pronounced angled framing of their fearful, upturned faces again evokes *Que Viva Mexico!*, as does the repeated background image of a cross (throughout his silent films and *Que Viva Mexico!* Eisenstein includes religious iconography, suggesting that the revolutionary cause of Christ has become the socialists' modern-day cause). The bombs soon start to fall and the peasant, who leads off one of the couple's children only to lose this child to a bomb, finds himself separated from his wife and other children, wandering about the stark bombed-out mountainside. Initially unwilling to join the revolutionary forces, the peasant upon rediscovering his family realizes he must take up arms against Batista.

A vital question to consider in regards to *I Am Cuba* concerns the efficacy of the film's revolutionary message. Given the melodrama and unwaveringly innovative camera work, how should this celebration of the Cuban Revolution be perceived? Does *I Am Cuba* bolster the assumption of compatibility between melodrama and revolutionary propaganda? "Like the oratory of the Revolution," Peter Brooks has suggested, "melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and its raison d'être the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths."<sup>13</sup> Kalatozov indeed amplifies the "ethical" truth of the Cuban need for revolution under Batista through the melodrama. Meanwhile, Kalatozov's brand of heroic melodrama of *I Am Cuba* unabashedly harkens back to its 1920s antecedents, and thus a slightly disconnected, retrospective tone emerges amidst all the impressive imagery and kinesthetic scenes of revolution. Kalatozov clearly strives for a delicate balance of old-fashioned agitprop and modern innovation. As he did in his ethnographic *Salt for Svanetia* some thirty years earlier, Kalatozov resists allowing the political message to take precedence over the filmic medium and acrobatic camerawork. Kalatozov's melodramatic "attractions" draw attention to themselves, constituting a formal revealing of the device while highlighting the genre's propagandistic underpinnings and also creating powerful, albeit stylized images of inequity and rebellion in pre-Castro Cuba.

Almost immediately after its release in 1964, Kalatozov's quixotic film came under harsh criticism from the Soviet authorities before it subsequently disappeared into involuntary obscurity. In what was reminiscent of Stalinist-era censorship practices, Soviet critics disapproved of Kalatozov's artistic vision and its evident overshadowing of the film's political message. Just as avant-garde films of the 1920s had been shunned as "formalistic" amidst the rise of Stalinism and Socialist Realism, *I Am Cuba* likewise came under attack for its artistic

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination," *Imitations of Life. A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, p.60.



affront to Soviet ideology, as it soon became a casualty of the tightening of artistic freedoms that occurred in the post-Thaw mid-1960s. Hence, the increasingly negative reviews of *I Am Cuba* following the film's brief appearance on Soviet screens, particularly from critics who expected a more politically authentic and less experimental, formal approach to the Cuban revolution. The filmmaker Grigorii Chukhrai (*Ballad of a Soldier*), to give one vivid example, indignantly exclaimed:

Depicting the despair of a peasant who burns the fruits of his labor, we are invited to admire the beauty of the fire and to marvel once again at the artistry of the camera work. We are not allowed to ignore this masterful work even when bombs kill a child. ... But please forgive me, this is insulting. The death of a child, broken love, the grief of a miserable man, anger that leads to the despair of an entire people – all of this is hardly the basis for such narcissism.<sup>14</sup>

To Soviet critics and less adventurous directors like Chukhrai, Kalatozov's retrospective approach to melodrama and his cinematic "narcissism" posed too great a threat to Soviet ideals and the nation's well-established glorification of revolution and revolutionary ideology. But in a certain sense these critics had a point, for Kalatozov undeniably favored silent film's visual tropes over ideology. Ironically, it would be Western filmmakers like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola who subsequently promoted *I Am Cuba* in the 1990s, when the film was rediscovered and rereleased. And in a manner somewhat akin to Kalatozov's paean to his silent start and early Soviet cinema, Scorsese has conspicuously celebrated silent film and its historical underpinnings, as his recent and quite popular *Hugo* (2011) accentuates, given this film's fictional inclusion of Georges Méliès in the narrative along with an interlude recounting the great filmmakers and actors of the silent era. *Hugo*, above all, demonstrates that the legacy and visual power of silent film persists up to the present day. And one might think that Kalatozov had a major role to play in this persistence.

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<sup>14</sup> Grigorii Chukhrai, "Novye fil'my. *Ia kuba*," *Iskusstvo Kino* 3 (1965), 36.