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The Alienation of the Human: Personal and Interpersonal Dissociation in *Soy Cuba*

The 1964 Soviet-Cuban collaboration film *Soy Cuba* provides a retrospective analysis of the motivations and social effects of the Cuban Revolution in four distinct episodes. The film's first vignette follows María, a *mulata* woman who works, reluctantly and unbeknown to her boyfriend, René, as a prostitute under the name Betty in a high-class club frequented by US Americans. She takes a client, Jim, to her home for work, and in the morning is discovered with him by René. After the two men leave the ashamed María, and the point of view shifts to spectate an increasingly panicked Jim dodging stares and beggars as he navigates out of María's impoverished neighborhood. The section ends with a voiced Cuba imploring Jim not to flee or look away, but to realize the reality of poverty that contradicts the US cultural image of Cuba as a luxurious island. The cohesive transitions, emotive performances, and skillfully built settings in María's story highlight her alienation from herself and those around her by her position as a sex worker and a laborer. Meanwhile, gestures of social ineptitude and dynamic camerawork and sound convey Jim as a capitalist guilty of María's social dispossession, but also a victim himself, unable to feel the empathy he should at her suffering. The film identifies these interpersonal separations as definitive aspects of a capitalist space that seems final and immovable, and in turn affirms hope, joy, and love as vital counters to capitalism, translating this message onto the viewer by endearing them to the characters.

Conceptually continuous editing and María's reserved expressions and body language make obvious her status as a victim of capitalism, forced to separate herself from others. She is introduced accompanying René, a fruit cart vendor, who in the scene smuggles documents, presumably for the Cuban Revolution, causing María to express concern at his safety. He reassures her that he will live to marry her, and she fantasizes about a church wedding but stops talking, seemingly troubled, as he asks her where she works. The subsequent cut from María outside a church with her boyfriend to Betty approaching clients in the club mimics her train of thought, from the possibility of marriage to the fear of repulsion and rejection for the work which capitalistic poverty has forced upon her. María's apprehension at René's contribution to the Revolution represents her refusal to enter into an unshielded interpersonal connection—both are because of the fear of retaliation. Money governs María's relationships, limiting them so that she may continue earning income, making concrete Marx's idea that capitalism "reduce[s] the family relation to a mere money relation" (420).

Conspicuous among her surroundings, María's portrayed victimhood gives a face to the lived realities of sex workers, who according to *Soy Cuba* experience such victimhood inwardly while presenting themselves as content to maintain business. Her alternate name, Betty, used only when she practices sex work, distinguishes her personal life from her work. The hard cut from the street to the club emphasizes her binary conceptualization of the two scenes. As a worker under capitalism, María does not consider her work her livelihood, rather working solely for the means with which to sustain her separate personal life (Marx 422). The position of the sex worker, shrouded in a taboo that makes synthesis with a social life difficult, readily materializes this travesty. María is the odd one out in acting demure toward the clients' advances—hesitating and panicking on the dance floor, turning away from Jim's kiss in the taxi—but seems to the

viewer completely justified because they see how her profession harms her life. Her reluctance to humor her client expresses incomprehension of the enthusiasm of the other prostitutes, accusing them of faking it. Given what the viewer sees, how can anyone be happy doing sex work? While dancing, the music turns "ominous and then cacophonous" as the clients drop their façade of politeness and begin shoving María between each other while laughing (Borge 148). The club devolves into its true nature: frightening and abusive. María exposes the internal reality, according to *Soy Cuba*, of the sex worker—no matter their countenance, oppressed.

The film generalizes this condition of sex workers to broad laborers allegorically through a devolution of settings and surrounding characters. Escaping from the suffocating artifice of the club, María brings Jim and the viewer to a more explicit exposition of suffering. As they leave by taxi, "the camera lingers on a neon light flashing the word 'Bar,'" associating the bright light with the fun illusion of Cuba (Thakkar 93). Upon the cut to inside the taxi, we see María's face "similarly lit by passing lights," the illusion stuttering and giving way to reality. María and Jim arrive in María's neighborhood, a world apart from the polished venue built for the foreign clients. This world is synonymously poorer and realer. The houses are small, sparse, and uneven, clearly makeshift, with fences of rotting wood and plastic panels. The night becomes silent, devoid of Cuba's imaginary perpetual party. Murky water pools in an unpaved walkway, threatening to dirty the two as they walk away from the mansions and taxi and into the neighborhood. These are the conditions behind the exotic image of Cuba, the suffering behind the affirming smile of the sex worker. The sex worker's surrendering explicitly and intimately to the capitalist represents the laborer's forcible submission and exploitation.

Chaotic sound, camera movement, and framing present Jim as not only as the symbol by which María is oppressed, but as another victim of capitalism, alienated from his own human

empathy by his desire to stay blissfully, wealthily ignorant. While leaving María's house, he delivers his final line: "Goodbye, Betty." Stepping out the door, he terminates her existence from his perspective. After teasing the viewer with his humanity by appearing more considerate of María's reluctance to engage with him, he gives up, simply cutting her fate off from his and forever ceasing to think of her. The next, final scene of the vignette follows Jim's departure from the neighborhood. The spread-out houses of last night have converged into dense alleyways, and their residents have begun emerging for the day. As his wrong turns evolve into a maze, the smooth soundtrack falls into harsh noises, forming a din with the shouts of a crowd of children following and begging Jim for money. The camera lingers on María's neighbors, all laboring or taking care of children, all unsmiling, letting the viewer see their toiling status. However, Jim cannot see from the viewer's perspective, stumbling past them (Oukaderova 11). Presented with a second chance and Cuba's urging him to recognize their humanity, Jim still refuses, turning his back on them, desperate to escape so that their plight does not accuse his comfort of violence.

Aided by lingering shots and audial-narrative loose ends, María's narrative creates a time-frozen space that represents the apparent endlessness of capitalistic relations. María's emotional delivery in the last scene of the night, where she throws her cross to the ground, expresses the frustration of being trapped in the capitalistic routine with no visible escape. She accomplishes nothing—Jim has sex with her nonetheless—jarring the viewer with anticlimax into realizing her plight. The scene happens between the expected linear sequence of the two traveling to her house and then having sex, providing a moment of hope in a cozily lit room that Jim might change his mind and spare her the displeasure of sex, or even try to help her out of sex work. However, Jim turns out the light and extinguishes that hope. María receives no happy ending. The encounter resolves into just another working night. She exists in a loop of suffering

by working, unable to progress in time. She is a victim of capitalism's "relentless assault on our ability to envision [its] end" (McCarraher 16). Oukaderova proposes that the cinematography of the film accentuates this temporal dissociation with its long shots and slow chronological pace, having "defeated time"—removed its apparent, linear constraint on the plot of a film—and erected space in its governing stead (4). The final shot of the vignette, of Jim walking away from the camera and around a distant corner, solidifies the infinity of capitalism. The film denies the viewer a definitive resolution, leaving Jim to wander forever, "disoriented and lonely … among disconnected multitudes" (9).

The story conveys the need for movement between spaces, where a capitalist space built from repression and alienation must give way to a revolutionary space of progress and rediscovery of human empathy in order to finally start moving through time. Despite its focus on the incommunicability of María and Jim, the film does present one productive interaction from which we can infer the solution to interpersonal distancing: René's smuggling documents for the Revolution. His action escapes María's narrative, passing through chronological time—in fact, leaping through it: one of his co-conspirators appears as the protagonists of the third vignette, a revolutionary student and eventually a martyr. Rene's action is the only revolutionary one in María's vignette and also the only one whose effects ripple through time, bursting the bubbles in which *Soy Cuba* otherwise places each of its four parts. René can also *see* through time, voicing his hope for a married future with María and inviting her to momentarily imagine with him. In addition to his transcendental narrative role, René represents anomaly by his characterization. In an unsettling story where people only appear happy in the artificial and infective club environment, René stands out as seeming genuinely joyful. He sings with a smile and excitedly speaks of his love for María. That René stands out in these two ways is no accident: *Soy Cuba*

wishes to associate the hopeful, joyful, loving person with revolutionary progress. As McCarraher says, “We will not be saved by our … weapons … we might be saved by the joyful and unprofitable [pursuit] of love” (18). To break free of perpetual capitalism, we must become Renés who reconnect with those around us and look forward to a better future.

Soy Cuba’s dispersed protagonism makes the characters relatable to the viewer to really effect the theme of interpersonal connection. Thakkar defines fictional protagonism as the amount a character contributes to the theme of a work, and social protagonism as the ability of an individual to change their society (84–7). He argues that by distributing the narrative and theme into distinct episodes and sets of fictional protagonists, *Soy Cuba* creates protagonists relatable to the viewer while connecting those protagonists to a narrative of revolution (89–90). María and Jim fail so spectacularly to achieve happiness so that the viewer mourns them. When the later episodes see the Revolution through, the viewer sees an alleviation of María’s and Jim’s suffering. The characters’ fictional protagonism comes from their low social protagonism. They make the *viewer* want social protagonism for all. Suddenly the viewer finds themself having taken *Soy Cuba*’s proposed first step against capitalism: they have connected to another person, albeit a fictional one, and have condemned worldly conditions on that person’s behalf. The film has successfully transcended medium and placed its message into the real world.

María’s vignette provides a clear motivation for the Cuban Revolution by excellently delegating revolutionary roles to its characters. María represents the victim of capitalism who lives and suffers by her labor; Jim, the capitalist who must simultaneously be overthrown and saved from a vacuum of empathy; and René, the life-loving, people-loving revolutionary who advances history. Through this story, *Soy Cuba* encourages the viewer to assume their own revolutionarily empathetic character and tear down the illusion of insurmountable capitalism.

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