



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Buena Vista Social Club by Wim Wenders; Deepak Nayar

Lágrimas Negras by Sonia Herman Dolz; Kees Ryninks

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Isakii and Taisia, will become husband and wife in 1917. Soon after, Isakii is killed. Their son Sasha, Sasha Solzhenitsyn, will appear in this world on eleventh of December, 1918, in the winter, a hard time of the year." With this narration, read by author-director Aleksandr Sokurov, we enter a short but expressively told life story of Nobel Laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. With solemn classical music in the background, performed by Solzhenitsyn's son Ignat, interlaced with the natural sounds of everyday life, we browse through old family photographs, almost hypnotized by Sokurov's slow, under-emphasized voice. "In 1941 he graduates . . . and leaves for the war . . . in 1942, while on the front, he writes his first stories . . . By the end of the war he is captain . . . In 1945 he is arrested . . . Since 1945, already for over fifty years, this man will have not one hour of peace. The stupidity of the rulers is a mortal disease. Silence of millions of witnesses, jealousy of the peers, exile, hard work."

Sokurov conveys his sadness that his Russian compatriots do not fully appreciate Solzhenitsyn. But one must readily agree with Sokurov that the Nobel Prize given Solzhenitsyn in 1970 made him "untouchable" by the regime. Sokurov quotes Solzhenitsyn's unforgettable words from the Nobel Address: "What can literature [do] against the assault of open coercion? Let us not forget that coercion does not live alone or is capable of living alone: it is necessarily interlaced with lies . . . And [it takes] a simple step of a simple brave man not to participate in lie: let this lie and coercion rule in the world, but not through me. The lie can withstand a lot in the world, but not against art. And as soon as the lie is refuted, the nakedness of coercion will be exposed in its ugliness."

Of his eighteen years of exile in Vermont, the writer says: "I was amazed in America by two aspects in nature. Completely different pine trees . . . And secondly, there are almost no singing birds . . . There are beautiful birds but they do not sing . . . There is fear of death in the West. Not just in the West, but all well-to-do people have a fear of death, which eclipses reason. If one can reach a condition in which one is not afraid of death, and moreover ready give oneself to God's will, then death is a natural transition from one condition to the other . . . just like our peasants always understood when they peacefully died . . . In Russia we used to have a feeling of repentance. Now it does not exist."

Sokurov, one of Russia's and the world's leading filmmakers, has produced a fine oeuvre of feature films, the latest of which, *Molokh* (1999), was honored for best screenplay last year at the Cannes Film Festival. Less known outside Russia is Sokurov's even greater body of documentary films, ranging in length from ten minutes (*Sonata for Hitler* [1979]) to over five hours (*Spiritual Voices* [1995]). His gallery of film portraits includes Dmitri Shostakovich, Feodor Shalypin, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Boris Eltsyn. *The Knot*, released in the year of Solzhenitsyn's eightieth birthday, offers an homage to the celebrated citizen and

writer. The director does not ask controversial questions (the only real weakness of the film); rather, he anticipates and mostly agrees with his subject's positions. Sokurov aspires to touch the great man and capture his image forever, or at least for as long as celluloid will preserve it. He succeeds in this task brilliantly.

Film combines a variety of cinematic means: still and motion photography, black and white, sepia and toned-down color stock. Sokurov employed such a variety of means by necessity in his first feature film, *Lonely Voice of Man* (1978). This mixing of stocks and techniques has since become his trademark, one he employs with impressive results. Here, he develops new stylistic variations: for example, still photographs do not just fill the screen but appear, as if icons, in a frame of human hands.

Sokurov, an heir to Tarkovsky, goes even further than his mentor in using a slow rhythm in his films and long silent takes, so that the images seem to enter the heart of the viewer directly, bypassing the mind. His use of pause is as effective in documentary cinema as it is in his feature films. "God help you," says Sokurov to Natalia, the writer's wife, who replies: "Thank you," and, a full twelve seconds later, adds: "This help we feel."

Sokurov constantly and masterfully juxtaposes a few images and sound sources at a time. For example, in one striking episode, we see three grounds: a large grandfather clock with swinging pendulum in front of a large window with city traffic behind it. We hear the metronomic sound of the pendulum, the natural noises of the street, and Sokurov's voice telling us about the emigration of the writer and his enormous archive. As the camera rolls back, the clock, window, and street shrink in the middle of the screen, becoming surrounded by the two-story wall of the archive. My favorite three-and-a-half minute sequence features extreme close-ups of the writer: a foot; a frame-full of his hair; a frame-size "thinking hand"; a stack of hair, in which we slowly recognize mustache and beard covering silently moving lips; an eye behind thick glasses; the hand of the writer proofing a manuscript; the "thinking hand" again. Finally camera rolls back and out into the adjacent room. An orchestra of natural sounds accompanies the scene, with the writer's breathing as its soloist.

Sokurov has written the screenplay in a style both expressionistic and primitivist. Director, interviewer, and narrator, he truly earned the title listed in the credits: "author of the film." As a viewer, I can now gratefully echo Sokurov's pronouncement in the film: "I hear his voice, and see his eyes—and remember everything, now for my whole life."

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BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB. Written and directed by Wim Wenders; produced by Deepak Nayar. 1999;

color; 104 minutes. English and Spanish with English subtitles. Distributor: Artisan Entertainment.

LÁGRIMAS NEGRAS. Directed by Sonia Herman Dolz; produced by Kees Ryninks. 1997; color; 75 minutes. Spanish. Distributor: Holland Film.

Cuba, a nation of eleven million inhabitants ninety miles off the coast of Florida, has played a variety of important roles on the world stage in the twentieth century. Cuba became a major actor on a number of international occasions, from the war of 1898 and the Good Neighbor Policy of 1933–1947 to the Cuban Missile Crisis of the 1960s and the East-West conflict of the Cold War, during which Cubans engaged in a series of collaborations and interventions in the Third World, from Angola to Nicaragua.

Although Cuban history has been wrought by social and political conflict, the nation's lasting influence might be found in another realm: music. As Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, the author of *Cuando salí de la Habana* (1999), reminds us, Cuba has exported and influenced music around the world since the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Cuban musical forms such as the *habanera*, the *bolero*, the *mambo*, and the *cha cha cha* have inspired individuals worldwide. With the onset of the revolution in 1959, large numbers of Cubans left the island taking these sounds with them. In the 1960s and 1970s, Cuban musicians such as Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés were in the forefront of the politically committed musical movement known as *Nuevo Canto*, or the New Song Movement, which influenced leftist movements throughout Latin America.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba has experienced a worsening social and economic crisis, which has spurred a reorganization of the Cuban socialist system. One of the key changes was the reopening of the tourist industry and the creation of joint ventures, companies owned and operated by foreigners in alliance with the Cuban state. This collaboration has also found its way into various cultural forums, as many foreigners team up with Cubans to produce CDs, films, and a host of other commodities. Two such collaborations, *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Lágrimas Negras*, offer windows onto Cuba's rich musical tradition, although with surprisingly few direct references to the country's political, social, and economic problems. These two films document changes in present-day Cuba and challenge viewers to forge a dialogue between music and history and between Cuba's past and future.

Both films are romantically idealistic, recalling a bygone era of Cuban music from the 1930s to the late 1950s, and both celebrate some of the dying emblems of the pre-Castro era, symbolized by the old American cars that appear constantly in the footage from Cuba. By focusing on talented but forgotten musicians of the pre-Castro era, rather than the more politically committed musicians of the 1960s or 1970s or the popular salsa musicians of the 1980s and 1990s (such as Los Van Van or Irakere), both films connect postcommu-

nist with pre-Castro Cuba. In so doing, these films inadvertently fuel the nostalgic feelings not only of many Americans and Cubans in the United States who remember the Havana of the 1950s but also of Cubans in Cuba who now reminisce about an era that no longer seems so bad. At the same time, both films appeal to the younger generations who have (until recently) been denied access to much of Cuba's music.

Buena Vista Social Club gained popular attention in the United States following on the heels of the successful CD of the same name. The German director Wim Wenders, who directed this film in close collaboration with American guitarist and Cuban music lover Ry Cooder, combines elements of the "band on the road" movie with tapings of live concerts, recording sessions, and personal interviews with members of the band. The film culminates in a concert at Carnegie Hall, and a roaming camera follows members of the band around New York City, registering the seemingly innocent comments of Cubans seeing New York for the first time.

The film is clearly the work of an enthusiast. It does not follow the classic documentary style, which attempts to enlighten or inform viewers following a given argument or theme. Interviews are relaxed and sympathetic, and they stay away from politics. Indeed, historians will have to fill in many of the details about Cuban music with assistance from other sources. Documentaries produced by the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos in Havana, such as *De dónde viene la Rumba* (1980) and Michael Dibb's BBC documentary, *Qué se toca en Cuba* (1985) are much clearer as educational tools, as is the three-part documentary series on the evolution of Latin music in the United States, *Routes of Rhythm* (1997).

Yet, it is precisely the "untouched" character of the music and musicians in this film that draws viewers in and raises a number of questions of interest to the historian. Two leading vocalists (Ibrahim Ferrer and Omara Portuondo, a 1950s Cuban radio personality) join together with a number of musicians, including guitarist Eliades Ochoa, trumpeter Manuel Vázquez, and pianist Rubén González, to perform a number of *sons*, *guajiras*, a *danzón*, and a few *boleros* with such grace that the viewer cannot help but be moved. The older generation in Cuba, the majority of them performers before the revolution, thrive despite the country's economic and political decay, seen as the camera roams around Havana and enters into the homes of some of the band members.

The failure of the Cuban Revolution, which aimed to eradicate class difference, sexism, and racism, is evident. For many of the musicians, it is as if the revolution never occurred. Ninety-year-old Compay Segundo, with his beautiful baritone voice, is a perfect symbol of the revolution: aging yet charming, romantic and seductive but unrealistic as he speaks of his love for Cuban music and his passion for women.

Romanticism aside, to understand the charm of this film, it is instructive to examine Ella Shohat's essay,

"Gender and the Culture of Empire: Towards a Feminist Ethnology of the Cinema" (1991). Shohat takes Hollywood films to task for a neocolonial pattern in which Western protagonists go into a foreign territory and uncover hidden secrets or find treasures hidden from the natives, using indigenous culture as a backdrop. While Cooder and Wenders certainly come off as heroes (for rediscovering Cuban treasures supposedly so hidden from ordinary Cubans that most *habaneros* had even forgotten where the Buena Vista Social Club used to be), the filmmakers do not use Cuban culture as mere backdrop. Rather, they integrate themselves into it, as Cooder and his son perform with the band. Cooder and Wenders have done some of the work of the historian by exposing these hidden treasures, although they fail to place the music in a historical or social context. The film lets the music and characters reveal themselves on their own terms, and for our enjoyment.

The lesser-known *Lágrimas Negras*, by Dutch filmmaker Sonia Herman Doltz, is another joint production based on a musical group, this one hailing from Cuba's second city, Santiago de Cuba. Doltz's camera creates a similar "band on the road" type of movie as she follows La Vieja Trova Santiaguera (The Old Santiago Troubadours), comprised of five men (Reinaldo Hierrezuelo, Reinaldo Creagh, Pancho Cobos, Aristoteles Limonta, and Ricardo Ortiz) between the ages of sixty-two and eighty-four. Doltz has edited and pulled together footage of interviews around Santiago and from the band's tour across Europe.

Released before *Buena Vista Social Club*, the film also followed on the heels of a successful CD, *La Vieja Trova Santiaguera* by the Spanish producer Manuel Dominguez, recorded for a Spanish label in 1994. The

film's title has many meanings. It is both sad and nostalgic, showcasing an Afro-Cuban musical group from a city considered the most Afro-Cuban, but one that is clearly undergoing severe economic decay. The song "*Lágrimas Negras*," however, is a 1930s *bolero* (a celebration despite sadness and loss) written by Miguel Matamoros, considered one of the founding fathers of Cuban popular music.

Doltz captures the feelings of sorrow and longing in addition to a *joie de vivre* in many of the concerts, performances, and interviews. At one point, Doltz juxtaposes local scenes of unbridled joy with frenetic applause at the concerts in London and Barcelona, going back and forth from local Cuban scenes to concert scenes abroad, marking the different ways that Cubans and Europeans celebrate but also emphasizing the universality of Cuban music. As in *Buena Vista Social Club*, the men's personal views (particularly on gender issues) are hopelessly out of step with many of the social values promoted by the revolution. Yet the band members all attest to the importance of the official revolution to their lives. In one scene (which does not seem contrived) on the road to London, the band visits and pays homage to the grave of Karl Marx.

Neither *Lágrimas Negras* nor *Buena Vista Social Club* place their subjects into the larger context of Cuban musical development. Nor do they ask major questions, such as: "Why or how have these musicians been forgotten?" Nonetheless, both films are testaments to the power of Cuban music in history and its rising influence today. It is not so much that a new generation is revisiting an old but that the old is back again.

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