I AM CUBA: Long shots and camera expression

The moving camera film essay becomes more expressive, through the use of close-ups and long shots, and more alive, through its ability to make us feel as though we are part of the action. This being said however 20 or so shots, regardless of how expressive or alive the camera is, are not sufficient enough to please viewers. This essay will explain and illustrate the above statements, which constitute topics 1 & 2. 13 pages long.

I AM CUBA

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The latter of the two questions, that is topic two is flawed at many levels and shall therefore be dealt with first. "A film need not please the viewers for the entire ninety minutes: about twenty exiting strong shots are sufficient." (Luc Moullet, "Cahiers du Cinema, April, 1960) The key words in this statement are "please", "viewers", and "twenty exiting strong shots".

The statement is flawed because it makes a sweeping generalization, which does not represent the bulk of film's audience. How many viewers, outside of film students, know what shots are to begin with? A majority of university students probably don't know what a shot is and they compose the bulk of intellectuals. The magazine, Cahiers du Cinema is inherently intellectual and does not at all address the bulk of film viewers. In essence "viewers" can mean the average viewer constituting 90% of the film audience or it could mean 10% including film students. The Cahiers du Cinema was making a sweeping statement addressing a small portion of viewers while disregarding all the others, which compose the bulk of the film audience. How many viewers could appreciate I Am Cuba for its camera movement?

Secondly, how does one define "pleasing an audience" in this definition? What pleases "which" audience, Star Wars, The Wizard of Oz, and Gone with the Wind or Blow-up, The Cranes are Flying, and Citizen Kane? The most important factor to consider is "which" audience do you want to please because unfortunately, based on my experiences in film studies, the two categories of audiences cannot be pleased by the same means. One either has to make the film entertaining or beautiful. This being said some films are both entertaining and beautiful but most main stream producers opt for a star-studded two hours filled with special effects to assure their return. Therefore one has to define "pleasing an audience" in terms of whom you are trying to please, without assuming and forgetting the bulk of the movie audience.

Finally "twenty strong exiting shots" is assuming that people watching the film know what shots are, without even mentioning whether the shots are designed to be beautiful or entertaining. For example the camera movement and panoramic shots in the opening sequence of I Am Cuba are eye catching and intellectually entertaining for film students, whereas the prostitution and revolutionary sequences might be more entertaining for less inclined movie audiences. In essence the question is; what makes a strong exiting shot in the eyes of selected viewers?

In essence topic two involves a question that has very little to do with camera movement, but is nonetheless very important, and more to do with a sweeping statement, found in the Cahiers du Cinema, which only addresses a very small part of the film audience. For what I can tell, no consistent attempt has yet been made to bridge both sides by way of equilibrium in film, which can blend beautiful and entertaining films.

Does moving the camera from side to side or up and down make the image more expressive and alive? I will argue that it does make the image more expressive and alive for viewers, especially film students, who understand the language of film form. I will also illustrate how the camera movement reflects the issues that govern this film such as prostitution, revolution, exploitation, protestation etc...

I will argue that an image becomes alive when the camera surrounds itself by the action in the scene and an image becomes expressive by capturing a particular character's mood or emotional state by using close-ups, and long shots.

The opening shot is somewhat contradictory and complex because, in its entire splendor it represents the four short stories that follow. The scene also represents

camera movement, which is both expressive and alive simultaneously. The shot in-itself is contradictory because it provides the viewer with a peaceful and beautiful panoramic view of parts of Cuba, which, on the surface, indicate anything but prostitution, revolution, protestation, and exploitation in the following short stories. The long shot is expressive because it provides an illusion of tranquility. One could also interpret the shot's expressive ending, when the camera lands on the island at a low angle, by noticing the tall impending trees, which stick out individually. I interpreted that as being a representation of the amount of individual courage each person needed to push Cuba into revolution.

 The shot can also be qualified as being alive, even though the camera does not blend itself into the action, because it does in a different fashion involve itself in the landscape like no other sequence in the film. The gliding effect provides the camera's action. As the camera "sweeps" it glides along the landscape and parallels much of the events that take place in the short stories. The camera provides a visual illustration in the opening shots, of the vast and complicated issues, which are presented in the short stories. In essence the camera movements in the opening shot are just as sweeping and problematic to shoot, as the themes of prostitution, oppression, revolution, are sweeping and problematic to Cuban society.

 The opening shot of the second short story, which involves a boat, steers through a semi-underwater village, and provides an example of camera movement that is alive because we are blended with the action. We could almost feel as though we were on the boat, leaning forward or backward, to enable ourselves to pass under the low lining trees. I would not consider it an expressive shot because no individual character's mood was captured, at least not to the extent of the shots to follow.

 The party sequence provides another vivid example of how camera movement becomes alive. The camera swirls amongst guests and literally joins the party and socializes while it climbs up steps, joins a conversation on the side of a building, and travels amongst band players. The camera's aliveness occurs when it attempts to get closer to the action that would be impossible in real life.

 The camera also provides expressive movements as it emphasizes on close-ups of Betty (prostitute character) and the black pop singer. As the camera blends in with the action, it puts us so close to the person that we could never be as close to those people even if we were there in person. In fact during the sequence with Rock & Roll music the image was so cluttered with people that we could almost feel an impingement of our vital space. The expressive moment in the party sequence occurs when we are presented with character's close-ups which reveals their

emotional state. This occurs numerous times with Betty's expression, which reveals that she is totally disinterested in the process, as opposed to the other prostitutes who appear to enjoy it. In parallel to Betty, the pop singer also displays revealing facial expressions. Close-ups reveal his facial expressions indicating that he has a passion for his singing, a passion that Betty also displays, at hating prostitution. In essence the camera's close-ups are just confirming a known fact that facial expressions speak a thousand words and can be very revealing towards a person's inner state.

Within the context of the series of shots in the party sequence, two other moments stick out as being significant, the under water sequence and the shot at the fruit stand which included Betty's boyfriend. The underwater shot illustrates another moment, when the camera comes alive, when it travels beneath the water along with a simulated muffled soundtrack. It represents the movements, which are battling in Cuba at the time, with Batista on the surface and revolutionary movement, lead by Castro, below the surface. I believe the underwater sequence illustrates parallels of the realistic political situation in Cuba.

Secondly the sequence involving Betty and her boyfriend, in addition to being expressive, is contradictory and once again, illustrates two parallel worlds. The sequence shows many close-ups of both their faces depicting hers, as shy and timid, and his as passionate and loving. The scene also provides a close-up of a fruit, which he holds out in the air, and represents the only truthful symbol in the scene. In essence both of the characters are fake as they both lead double lives, one hands out revolutionary news, while the other lives as a prostitute by night. The scene is contradictory because both people look genuinely nice when in reality they are both fakes for reasons mentioned above, similar to the illusion, which the sweeping opening images provided. The camera, in this instance contributed by providing a false sense of representation by illustrating the character's expressive moments through the use of its close-ups. In this respect both the under water shot and the fruit stand sequence present a set of issues on the surface, by using the camera's expressive movements, while hiding other issues not yet revealed at that point in the film.

As the short story progresses the camera's expressions through its close-ups and long shots contrasted issues of innocence verses filth and wealth verses poverty. The scene began by providing long shots of both Betty and the businessman as they entered her village. In doing so this enabled the camera to contrast wealth and poverty by depicting two well-dressed people entering a village of shacks with no running water. The scene ends when the businessman exits, as he is mobbed by children who are half dressed with barely any food to eat. The second contrasting

set of issues surrounds the moments when Betty and the businessman are in her home and prepare to be intimate. The camera's close-ups, illustrates their indifference towards each other. Betty is disgusted at the process and the businessman is obsessed with her cross and the symbolism of innocence, which it entails. The camera's main role, in this particular scene, served as a vehicle to illustrate contrasting emotional states in several characters by making use of close-ups and long shots.

The second short story features some of the best camera movement of the film. The entire story includes moments when the camera is expressive and alive while it presents the issue of exploitation. The scene opens up with a series of full body and long shots, highlighted by a heavily lighted background, which produces dark figures. This somberness, created by these figures, expressively foreshadows the events to follow. Two shots are telling and vivid when the man is looking out of his window and when he stands on the hill looking up into the sky. Although there are no noticeable facial features in these scenes the entire mise en scene along with the low camera angle creates an overall dark expressive moment.

The vivid camera moments begin with the man's walk through his sugarcane as the low camera angle makes them seem impinging in their sheer size. Once again the camera is so alive in this sequence that we can feel ourselves walking through the sugarcane with the man. As he and his children begin cutting the sugarcane three horsemen arrive in the distant background, with a framing that symbolically includes three trees in the extreme background. From this moment on there are a series of long and close-up shots which give the camera its expressiveness in this particular short story. The long shots serves as a reflection of the alienation that both the man and the three-horseman feel towards each other because they talk and keep their distance at all times, providing a panoramic view of the sentiment of alienation. The camera then cuts to a close-up of the man's facial expression when he realizes that he will lose everything he owns.

The camera then begins a period when it is both expressive and alive simultaneously when he is driven by sheer anger, furiously begins cutting his sugarcane. The camera is in close-up in order to capture his anger but at the same time the camera is moving furiously to capture every swipe he is taking at the sugarcane creating a sequence in true Eisenstenian tradition, as seen in the plate breaking sequence in Battleship Potemkin. The camera remains still when, out of anger, he screams "I am not tired" and we witness a shot that captures him raising his sword up in the air in Greek like fashion. This scene then, very poetically, ends with shadows, which are caused, not by night but by smoke, from his burning home

and sugarcane field. This short story provided a vivid illustration of the extent of human exploitation through the camera's expressiveness and aliveness.

The third short story begins with an expressive moment, which focuses on light as opposed to human expressions. The camera movement is centered on a variety of different light sources. The flashing lights begin with a Molotov cocktail, which is thrown at the movie screen. Then we witness the fire in the movie screen. Then we see the headlights of the screen, to headlights of multiple cars, to streetlights, and a GE sign. Finally a long string of stores are heavily lit from within. Perhaps the scene is emphasizing the light as being a symbol that signifies brighter days ahead for the revolutionaries.

An interesting moment of camera movement and symbolism in this third short story occurred when a revolutionary took a bus to meet his friends at the memorial-square. When he stepped out of the bus he went around the bus to the front and crossed the street and ran up the stairs. Interestingly enough the camera remained inside the bus and swiveled around as he made his way up the stairs. The movement is neither expressive nor is it alive until we get to the monumental shot of the man running up the stairs which looks a lot like the sweeping landscape shots in the beginning of the film. In essence the ending of this shot and beginning of the next represent another expressive moment. He appears tiny, as the camera looks on from within the bus, beside the large stairway that leads up to the monument. In addition the next shot supports this claim because the shot is not as long as the one prior, it still depicts the man as being small beside its tall structures. The camera movement in its expressive long shots, helps represent the bureaucratic structure which is monumental and filled with red tape, leaving no other way to change it but through revolution. The long shot of the man as he runs up stairs provides a graphic illustration of the uphill battle, which lies ahead of him, and the rest of Cuba.

Another scene, within this short story, where the camera is both expressive and alive, occurs when the revolutionary gets shot and falls off the balcony. The camera comes alive as it simulates the act of falling and swivels wildly in mid air, an act that no one would want to be a part of. The camera then shifts to a mode of expression as it provides a bird's eye view of the fallen man with a crowd of onlookers who then circle the dead man.

The ending scene in the revolution short story demonstrates a gliding camera, which is not as panoramic as the landscape shot in the beginning but it is very expressive in its long shots. The camera is expressive because it provides a long shot of thousands of protesters and illustrates the scope of the revolution. The camera

does not only provide a panoramic view of the parade but it also travels along the building, which enables the audience to participate at the same pace of the march. The long gliding bird's eye view provides a sweeping view similarly to the opening landscape shots. The camera therefore becomes expressive in this instance because it provides thousands of sentiments within one shot, which amplifies its close-up facial shots. In essence the scope of the shot was presenting a mirror image as the scope of the revolution in its view high bird's eye view shot.

Finally the fourth short story begins with a camera which is both expressive and alive and hysterical at the same time. The sequence begins with an ambush, which takes place at night in the middle of a swamp. Quiet cleverly the camera is hysterical because we cannot recognize what is happening other then snaps shots of oblique angles which are hard to decipher. In doing so the camera accurately illustrates the chaos of such a situation if we would finds ourselves in the middle of the action. We hear wild dogs, people walking and running, water splashing while the camera aimlessly attempts to capture the expression of these actions. As the camera swivels through shadows, sounds, and flashing lights we ourselves our caught in this action without being presented with detailed facial close-up shots. In essence the camera is expressive because it is merely illustrating chaos by presenting images that are also chaotic.

The second section in this short story focuses on shots, which point to the sky and foreshadow the mountain villagers' vulnerability in the air bombardments. The entire scene when the man is having diner and is joined by another man is tranquil yet suspicious. The camera is stable like no other scene in the film because it is depicting the everyday life of refugees in the mountains. The camera movement therefore consists of movements, which reflect a diminished lifestyle and minute by minute detail, which makes the difference between life and death. The camera movement remains still reflecting the family "cover" within the mountains. In essence the bombing raid which immediately follows illustrates the chaos which arises demanding split minute decision. The camera is mirroring the family's quiet moments in reflecting the seemingly none expressive lifestyle which the family is subjected to in the mountains. It also provides a realistic illustration of the living conditions for many Cubans in the sixties during the revolutionary period.

However this tranquility is quickly broken when the family is attacked and runs for cover under a blanket of bombs. The camera in cautious because it distances itself from the action as the bombs land a short distance away. In maintaining its distance the camera acts as another person who is also running from the falling bombs which allows the audience to participate in two actions simultaneously. The camera depicts the man who is running with his child and, self reflectively, the camera is

reflecting another person who is also running to shelter. Once again the camera allowed the audience to participate in the action by rightfully illustrating the chaos caused by bombing.

 In conclusion the camera movement, in I Am Cuba is not sophisticated in its movement but rather in the way its aimless directions illustrate a character/s emotional status, through the use of close-ups and long shots, at any given moment. Parallel to this the camera becomes alive when it actively involves itself in the action, which makes us feel as though we are part of the action. This explains why the camera movement was meant to be jerky or odd in this film. Life's movements are not composed of steady pans or smooth camera movements. Life is rough and bumpy and the camera's movement in being "alive" reflects this reality in I Am Cuba.

 by Pierre Hobson