



THE CUBAN REVOLUTION IN THE EYES OF AMERICAN CINEMA

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- Now, soldiers are paid to fight, rebels aren't.
- What does that tell you?
- They could win.

Michael Corleone to Hyman Roth (dialogue from *The Godfather: Part II*, 1974)

On July 26th, 1958 there began the movements that ended up with the siege of La Habana by Fidel Castro's revolutionary troops on January 1st, 1959, putting an end to Fulgencio Batista's regime. These occurrences amazed the United States, who witnessed their close ally being overthrown by an armed revolution that would later adopt a Communist stand and act as a satellite for the Soviet Union. In a few days, hundreds of pro-Batista Cubans in favour of Batista went into exile in Florida, in particular settling in Miami, fleeing from the possible retaliations they could suffer. This first wave of exiles was composed mainly by members of the upper classes of Cuban society—entrepreneurs, senior officials, managers, stockbreeders, etc—who thought the Revolution would not last long. This generated a period of conflictual relationships between the US, the Cubans exiled in the US territory, and the revolutionary government of the island, a situation that extends to the present day.

Since the Revolution, Hollywood has been developing an image of the Cuban uprising mainly characterized by its rejection. Moreover, it is characterized by a stress on the continuous threat that revolutionary Cuba allegedly poses to the American country, although there can be also found some examples departing from the idealization of the American role on this issue. The purpose of this article is to address in an exploratory, descriptive, and chronological way three movies that

somehow reflect the US views on the island and its turmoils: *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), *Thirteen Days* (2000) y *Scarface* (1983), respectively.



The first movie we are going to deal with is *The Godfather: Part II*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola and released in 1974. Few days before the revolutionary triumph, on January 1st, 1959, Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) settles in La Habana for business. The main character witnesses, with great interest, the extreme tension present on the streets precluding the systemic change. The visual representation of the extreme poverty that hits the city, embodied by the numerous kids approaching the luxurious car of the head of the Corleone family, is more than enough to contextualize the causes of the revolt. The action is then moved to the opulent Presidential Palace of La Habana (currently home to the Museum of the Revolution), showing Fulgencio Batista and Corleone gathered together with representatives of some influential American enterprises. Lastly, back in the car, Don Corleone and his retinue presence the immolation of a revolutionary aiming to kill a police officer to the cry "Que viva el 26 julio, que mueran los batistianos, viva Fidel" (Coppola 1974). As a triptych, Coppola strings together three different scenes showing the desperate situation of misery of the Cuban lower class; the inequality resulting from the looting of the country by the big Cuba-American elites and the mafia; as well as the consequences deriving from this situation: violence on the streets.

The second movie is *Thirteen Days* (2000), directed by Roger Donaldson and based on the volume *The Kennedy Tapes: The White House during the Cuban Missile*



Crisis (1997), written by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow. The film, making use of remarkable historical licenses in favour of drama, is set on the critical days of the widely known “Cuban Missile Crisis” of 1962. During this critical period of the Cold War, the escalation of tension between the Soviet Union and the United States reached its climax due to the installation of nuclear-missile batteries on the island by the Russians, putting US national security at risk. Falling under Soviet influence, Cuba is then portrayed as a dormant yet close threat, as well as a defiance to the Monroe Doctrine and the natural condition of “backyard of the US” assigned to the Latin American nations.

The soundtrack plays an essential role at inducing to the binomial good/evil (Communism/dictatorship vs. Capitalism/democracy), sounding lively and triumphant when the threat is repelled, and tense and threatening when anyone from the communist side makes his/her appearance on stage. However, the neutralization of the threat is not carried out by the use of violence, but by diplomacy, through the exposition of the truth and the isolation of the most belligerent sectors of the high commands of the United States, who verbalize their distrust towards Kennedy in some scenes. In short, it is the triumph of the moderation of the Democratic Party over the unmeasured violence and provocation of the communist tyrannies. The only conflicting element within the narrative is the dramatic section in which President Kennedy (Bruce Greenwood) regrets his failure at the Bay of Pigs and the fact that the US couldn’t eliminate Castro when feasible.

Lastly, the polemic *Scarface*, released in 1983 and directed by Brian de Palma, stages the collective hysteria surrounding the *marielitos*: the main actors characterizing the third wave of Cuban immigration to the United States. The film portrays them as a threat to the established order of the North American society, due to the deep moral corruption that communism cause on its victims. The protagonist, Tony Montana (Al Pacino), is an ex-convict arriving to the United States with the ambition of fulfilling the American Dream. Together with his partner and friend, Manny Ribera (Steven Bauer), he sets onto a violent path that will turn him into one of the most influential and powerful figures within the criminal empire of Miami. Yet, this journey immerses Tony in a process of self-destruction that turns Montana, and those around, into the incarnation of the worst elements of society (assassins, thieves, junkies, etc).

In conclusion, these three films are among the many other that portray revolutionary Cuba from the perspective of US cinema: as victim of the capitalist voracity (*The Godfather: Part II*), as a threat to national security (*Thirteen Days*), and as a social threat from the inside (*Scarface*). Aside from these, there are various works that, in mainstream American cinema, have offered various interpretations over the reality and meaning of the island, illustrating the very close relations that exist between both nations, whether good or bad.



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