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Film Review: Maestra

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***Maestra* (2011), documentary, directed by Catherine Murphy. US, 33-minutes, Colour, DVD, Spanish, English subtitles. Distributed by *Women Make Movies*. Order No. W141121**

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***Maestra* in Cairo**

When lights suddenly surprised my undergraduate students in the soothingly dark screening hall of the English Department at Cairo University, I realized, with relish, that *Maestra* leaked from the screen into their fascinated senses, let alone, their lives. I had a similar experience, weeks earlier, with a niche of scholars and researchers when I first watched the film during the 2015 ASEAN Literary Festival in Jakarta. Almost half an hour earlier, when the screening began, my Cairine audience gathered that Cuba, focalized in white big letters on the first of a series of black introductory canvases, and simultaneously vocalized by an explosion of an energetic popular Latino chant: “CUBA”, accompanied by rhythmic spurts of clanking, was to be the place from which places and faces would emerge. These were to be illuminated by a past so exquisitely (and intelligently) brought alive by director Catherine Murphy. Cuba was a realm of reality so miles apart from where we were in the hall, I mused then. But Cuba *of the early Sixties!* 1961, to be exact, as the canvas-sandwiched footage of the huge procession headed by Fidel Castro, Osvaldo Dorticós, el Che and other leaders of the La Coubre boat sabotage showed - followed, again, by the focalized year on the second canvas - seemed a somehow foreign, if not enigmatic, temporal terrain. Shimmery images of iconic el Che’s monochrome features on the walls of a friend, a T-shirt, or a restaurant, and vague associations of a once-upon-a-time ambitious revolution and aspiring reforms (that brought Castro’s Cuba and Gamal Abd el-Nasser’s Egypt together during the late Fifties and, later on, the Non-Aligned Movement) floated into the hall. “The dictator and the rebel”, was a whisper somewhere. The members of my audience, I realized, were not merely victims of the manipulation of global media often controlled by the narrative of victor political charlatans, but also by history’s amnesia, discarding, under-representing and sometimes misrepresenting, as years pass by, juicy lumps of narratives, and dumping these among the clutter of humanity’s already crowded memory lane. *Maestra* was to be their special experience of what they have lately come to know as alternative narrative.

Installing Filters, Tracks and Anchors

To make amends, a temporal repositioning of the audience was pre-planned and a dose of palimpsestic memory hauled into the hall. It was to be echoed and re-echoed throughout the film in the factual authenticity of footage and still *period* photos. Once brought in, the politically *charged* Cuban Sixties, with their national fervor, land reforms, and belligerent defiance of poverty, illiteracy, *and* US maneuvers (Isenhour’s and, after him, Kennedy’s attempts to bring Cuba back to the capitalist political barn with the notorious Bay of Pigs Invasion and *Operation*

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Mongoose—a plan to sabotage and destabilize the Cuban government and economy²) slotted into their assigned part as mental filters for the *real* treat, i.e., the *Campaña Nacional de Alfabetización en Cuba*, Cuba's 1961 National Literacy Campaign. Again, the campaign was focalized and brought alive with more information canvases and vibrant footage in quick succession. The footage showed a young girl in military attire putting an instruction book in a bag; enthusiastic boys and girls out of a river boat in a poor rural area; a determined boy riding a horse amid trees and shrubs; a dedicated teacher writing big chalk vowels on a blackboard over the wall of an impoverished country house; another boy teaching an attentive aging peasant; smiling young women running excitedly down steep mountainous grounds; then another young woman teaching a farm family in a beggared dim room. The successively meshed in-between information canvases grafted the primary memory tracks that would turn Murphy's visual documentation of the world's most ambitious and organized literacy campaign (according to UNESCO) into an internal guide for a more direct relationship with the real world, our world. The tracks included the fantastic number of participants (250,000 who comprised the "literacy brigade" or *brigadistas*) who responded to Castro's open call for volunteer literacy teachers and the massive media campaign that went all over the country then; the equally overwhelming number of those who were able to read and write by the end of this year (700,000, predominately illiterate peasants or *Guajiros*); the fact that 100,000 teachers were under the age of 18; and that more than half of the volunteers were women, the majority of whom went out to teach literacy in rural communities across the island. When canvas and footage, capturing the youthful faces of the campaign (all, like the first girl, dressed in military attire), came to an end, with the capitalized title, *Maestra* (Teacher) halting the sequence, the story of the campaign streamed in from its historical confinement. The alternative narrative was about to begin, in Spanish, accompanied by English subtitles and intermittently graced with the voice (-over) of Alice Walker.

Footage of Fidel Castro at the UN announcing the launching of the "year of education" (January 1-December 22) to eradicate illiteracy in Cuba frames the first phase of the narrative: "Our people will fight a great battle against illiteracy with the ambitious goal of teaching each illiterate person to read and write in the upcoming year". Castro's voice branches into various videos of Cuban crowds, attentively glued to a T.V. screen, and listening to their leader. The footage acts as an authoritative anchoring of "lived-reality", a serious, emotionally charged reality made all the more powerful by access to the lives of nine amazingly inspirational Cuban female witnesses. It is the stimulating interviews and stories of those *still* passionate ladies, who were, back then, only young but very zealous girls volunteering as literacy teachers in a first-timer literacy campaign of a country in the making, that chant the audience into the incantatory world of *Maestra*.

Pulsating with proud personal narratives and intersected with rich archival footage and still photos of the rural world(s) in which they lived for a whole year (these are ingeniously visually manipulated by a dramatizing lens that animates the stillness of a zoomed in face or a bunch of details sliding smoothly around a place), the eight-year-in-the-making coloured testimonies of the ladies begin the incantation. Daysi Veitia (architect), Gina Rey (urban planner), Norma Guillard (social psychologist), Eloisa Hernandez (translator), Adria (film and theatre actress) & Ivonne Santana (teacher), Blanca Monett (medical secretary), Diana Balboa (visual artist) and Griselda Aguilera (math teacher), are so beautifully alive and so brilliantly meshed with photos and footage of their black and white girly selves. One-on-one, in arabesque sit-down interviews, the ladies

² John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. "The Bay of Pigs." *JKF in History*. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/The-Bay-of-Pigs.aspx>. Accessed on 1 August 2015.

speak off-camera, their voices and faces, dominating the screen, melt into the photos and footage of their rural lives during the campaign. A chequered black-and-white reconstruction of nine lives strikes the magic and heart-warming message of *Maestra*.

Immersed in the richness of the photos and footage, we follow the virgin years of those participants (ages range from 7 to 17, students, mostly from secondary and high schools), and re-live their falling in love with the “feeling of independence”; their defiance and persistence in the face of anxious parents worried about their girls venturing away from home, heading for remote country and mountain regions where running water and electricity were non-existent, and living with families they did not know. Intrigued, we watch them in their 15-day training at the beachside town of Varadero (once an exclusive community for the wealthy; many of its grand mansions transformed into schools and museum after the revolution) and ponder over the heavy (compound) task ahead: “We had to be like family doctors are today. Helping create healthy habits, life habits, a series of things”. We eye them, curiously, as they ride trucks and trains, wade in waters, walk like miniature creatures among giant trees and green-thick hills and mountains - armored only with their pencils, workbooks, lanterns and hammocks – then reach their assigned new “homes”/cottage-schools, take census, schedule classes, help farmers turn a kitchen table into a class, improvise a blackboard, and share their students’ startling discovery of their ability to read their names.

The Empathic Self

“Cuba Invaded: Foes of Castro Open Offensive”, thus announces the voice of Ed Herlihy in the *Historic Universal Studios* newsreel segments of the aftermath of the failed 1961 invasion of Cuba (by CIA financed and trained Cuban exiles). By the time we reach the assault on Cuba’s Bay of Pigs, which took place in the middle of the campaign, Murphy has succeeded in turning memory into an emotional space and in making connections between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective. Intense empathy thus sifts onto the fear-full senses of the audience. The atmosphere of threat and danger invades the seats in the hall. The music in the background becomes tremulous. “Armed insurgents intent on toppling the new Cuban government still roamed the countryside where thousands of literacy teachers were hard at work”, the sanguine voice of Alice Walker resounds in our chests. But, then, a stream of still photos showing the literacy teachers at work with their studious students/farmers glows, with nonchalance, into our eyes. They are not afraid. But an appointment with death is due: one of the teachers is assassinated by the insurgents. Not unsurprisingly, the glow in the photos shines even more: the overwhelming funeral footage of the murdered teacher, Manuel Ascunce, bleeds away into the boldness of defiance: “It was very painful. Well, that just gave us more determination to continue, because it was very beautiful what was happening”, and the brilliant juxtaposition of the highly symbolic footage of a zoomed-in teacher’s hand (only the hands) gently passing a pencil to the trusting fingers of her aging male student.

Politics is not, however, as always, the only bewildering reality. With incredible strength, faith, and patience the girls come out victorious in the face of all the “machismo”, misunderstanding (a jealous husband neither wanting to learn nor allowing his wife to), paranoid ideas (jealous wives fearful for their husbands), and social restrictions related to the role of women back then. Interesting footage and still photos of the essential female stereotype (lovely young ladies in swimming suits posing for Miss Cuba, fluffy dresses, etiquette classes, dolly girls balancing books and walking gracefully, a self-adoration gaze in a mirror) are followed by those

of a dedicated female teacher at work, a military clad girl at the wheel of a Jeep, passing a lantern to other female colleagues around the car. We smile away our amazement, and seek instead the root of those girls moral stamina, their extraordinary sense of responsibility (the story of Griselda, aged 7 and her completely illiterate 58 year old student, given a teaching assignment close to her home) and their fountain-like patience flowering into decisiveness and courage to teach those deprived and marginalized (by *real* dictatorships) for whom education has become “insulin”.

You never think that what you do is important or not. You just do it. Back then, I was only 12, I didn't know that this would be so historical, or that it would be important. But as a sensitive person, I knew I was doing a good thing. I was doing good for people, that I was giving something of myself to others. That's what was always taught at our home; that we have to share what little we had.

An incredible urge to bring knowledge to those who did not have it, to share it, and to celebrate it becomes the sole purpose of life.

Helping others selflessly is one of the best things that can happen to you in life. And when you discover that at such a young age as I had the opportunity to do, you can never stop. It becomes the foundation of one's life. It becomes the purpose for one's life.

Is it the regenerating power of life that pushes the human Self to be more than *its* self? Is it ecstatic achievement? Is it the liberating impulse given a chance to break free from familial bonds, taboos, and the twinkles of self-doubt, all materializing in the joyful cry of a poor peasant who could read and write? It is all that.

For me, it was decisive: my ability to evaluate myself; to know what I was capable of. After the campaign, I know that I could aim higher in life. I didn't have to settle for the future my Mom planned for me. I could aspire to more.

For those women weaving their memories of the campaign (for the audience too) reconstructing their coherent selves over time, the campaign was a crucible in which the inner world of the self and the world of others were not only beautifully amalgamated, but exquisitely purified.

Murphy further expands the emotional space of her empathic audience by bringing along interviews with some of the farmers who were themselves students at the time of the campaign. Their warm recollections of the girls (they were not only teachers, but fellow workers in the agricultural jobs the farmers did, “all types of work ... they never failed”) and the familial ties that bound them at the time blow more life into the eventful past. The album of photos capturing the *brigadistas* working with their students in the morning fields and attentively guiding them in the quiet of the evenings is extremely heartwarming. Footage of jubilant parties and barbecues, singing and dancing, and group photos of happy, fulfilled faces crown the journey that every one took into the heart of the Other.

Departures and Arrivals

One of the most touching scenes of the film is the arrival of the crowded trains carrying the literacy teachers after a year-long absence from their real families. Again, footage of the excited, singing crowds in the trains, going back to the cities and the towns that they have departed months earlier, brings the audience to emotional arms, searching eyes, waving hands, hugging chests, and touching fingers confirming the flesh-and-blood presence of their proud girls, who are not the same girls anymore. The march in the Plaza of the Revolution, full to the brim with thousands of enthusiastic literacy teachers carrying big pencils (symbolizing the triumph of education) is both an empowered and an empowering moment in the personal history of, not only the girls, the sea of Cubans hailing them in the Plaza, or the students they left behind, but also the members of the audience in the screening hall.

When the ladies clinch the interviews with their final words, the message of the documentary becomes a vision, an embodied vision that has struck roots in the empathic selves of the audience; in the intense emotional space that has been created throughout the screening; in the affective tracks of memory that have become a shared experience: a departure that is, at once, and forever, an arrival.