

(Un)staging the city: Havana and the Music Film (2001-05)

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By the late 1990s, so-called ‘authentic’ visual representations of Cuba, and specifically Havana, had acquired a ‘distinct aesthetic quality’ (Hernandez-Reguant 2009). This was the product of a proliferation of Cuban images on a global scale, presented predominantly by western image-makers, which threatened to suffocate arguably more realistic depictions of the island and its capital city. In order to explore this phenomenon, this article will discuss three music documentary films produced by western filmmakers: *Our Manics in Havana* (2001), *Out of Exile* (2005) and *Simply Red – Cuba!* (2005). This article argues that these filmic texts are emblematic of a type of spatial narration that confines the viewer to a restricted view of select tourist sites and sights in Havana, which are recognizable only as a result of the recurrence of pre-existing images that have continued to shape these locations in the global imaginary. In turn, by scrutinising the production, inscription and consumption of these different visual narratives, it will consider their respective representations of Havana, and propose that these films have contributed to the construction of a problematic, fetishistic, and ultimately reductive image of the city that bears little relation to the geographic real.

KEYWORDS: Cuba, Havana, documentary, film, music

Introduction

In March 2016, the legendary British rock-band The Rolling Stones hit the headlines after announcing a free show to be held later that month in Havana's Ciudad Deportiva. The concert, arranged to coincide with the end of their Latin American tour, took place just days after President Barack Obama had travelled to the Cuban capital with his family, becoming the first sitting United States president to visit the island in eighty-eight years. This took place following a well-documented 'thawing' in relations between the United States and Cuba that had been closely monitored by the world's media following a process of normalization in their relations announced by the two countries in December 2014. During this period, discussion regarding western music acts that had both visited Cuba and played concerts in Havana since the 1959 Cuban Revolution became a hot topic. For example, a *Rolling Stone* magazine feature published in the days leading up to the event reflected on over fifty years of foreign musicians visiting the island. The article began as follows:

Despite its troubled political history, Cuba has generally enjoyed a warm relationship with international musicians. Over the years, a handful of artists in a variety of genres have travelled to the embargoed nation as cultural students and unofficial diplomatic representatives. For decades, the Cuban government placed a strict ban on rock music in the name of 'ideological deviation,' but these restrictions are becoming more relaxed. (Runtagh 2016)

Indeed, as Jordan Runtagh indicates in his article, since the early 2000s in Cuba, the Ministerio de Cultura de la República de Cuba, headed by Abel Prieto, and the Instituto Cubano de la Música, have been more welcoming with regards to the organisation of rock and pop performances in Havana and throughout Cuba. Subsequently, they have permitted a

growing number of concerts to take place; a notable shift from Fidel Castro's previous condemnation of rock 'n' roll as a type of 'intellectual diversionism' (Phelan 2001). These acts have included Negu Gorriak, Asian Dub Foundation, Sir George Martin directing Cuba's National Symphony Orchestra, Rick Wakeman, Air Supply, Sepultura, Manu Chao, Elbow, Juanes, Ojos de Brujo, Calle 13, The Dead Daisies, electro music outfit Major Lazer (featuring Diplo), and The Rolling Stones. Additionally, this list has included three of the bands and performances whose ensuing music documentary films set in Havana form the basis for discussion in this article. The films in question cover the Welsh rock-band Manic Street Preachers' visit in 2001, and the British soul-outfit Simply Red and the American group Audioslave's respective trips to the city in 2005. Importantly, the majority of the popular music artists mentioned above have not only visited the country to perform, at times assuming the role of multi-genre, cultural, and quasi-political ambassadors, but have also returned to their respective countries and shared their experiences with a global audience through the release of live albums and music documentary films that have been made available to fans in the form of CDs, DVDs and through television broadcasts.

This article explores and contests the circulation of a number of visual narratives and imaginaries pertaining to foreign visions of Cuba (and more specifically Havana) that emerged as a result of the creation of these products between 2001 and 2005. Furthermore, it will focus primarily on the spatial representation of the city in the music documentary film, considering the use of the different documentary modes and cinematic styles employed in three filmic texts: *Our Manics in Havana* (dir. Russell Thomas, 2001), *Out of Exile* (dir. Lawrence Jordan, 2005) and *Simply Red – Cuba!* (dir. Hamish Hamilton, 2005). In doing so, the article will also draw upon the significance of the locations at which these concerts were held (the Teatro Karl Marx, the Tribuna Antiimperialista José Martí, and the Gran Teatro de La Habana) and will explore how these different spaces, each with their own respective

definable characteristics, histories and meanings to different audiences, occupy an important and symbolic place in both the Cuban and western imaginations. It will also propose that, accompanied by spin-off live or Cuba-themed albums, these films have further contributed to exoticized and/or nostalgic representations of the city that have promulgated the idealized visual construction of Havana. As my readings below will reveal, this is further problematized by the artists and filmmakers' desire both to construct and consume these imaginaries, in turn fetishizing and memorializing Havana as both 'real' and 'imagined'.

In order further to consider the production and consumption of the imaginary city (and specifically the notion of an idealized Havanascape) it is useful to return to the philosophical writings of Henri Lefebvre in his influential work *La Production de l'espace* (1991). In his chapter entitled 'Spatial Architectonics', Lefebvre describes the 'space of the dream', which he sees as 'at once imaginary and real' (1991, 209). '[I]t establishes a virtual reign of pleasure', he writes, 'a theatrical space even more than a quotidian or poetic one: a putting into images of oneself, for oneself' (209). In my interpretations of the various *Havanas* depicted on screen in the films explored below, my analysis will consider the materialization of this 'real' and 'imagined' space. Moreover, rather than observing these representations as passive and/or removed from reality, I will scrutinize the ways in which these films have actively contributed to the intensification of certain visual narratives relating to the Cuban capital and to the formation of different Havana imaginaries.

Historical context: the Buena Vista Social Club boom

The three music films discussed in this article emerged in the wake of what critics have described as the Buena Vista Social Club boom or phenomenon, in reference to the years following the success of the Buena Vista Social Club musical group's 1997 recording and

that of the film, directed by Wim Wenders, released in 1999. The Cuban writer Leonardo Padura would later describe this period as ‘un acto de magia’ (an act of magic) that was fuelled by a nostalgia for Cuba which transformed the recording and subsequent film into a globally successful commercial phenomenon.¹ This audio-visual body of work would soon come to form part of a ‘visual register’ (Quiroga 2005, 159) for a post-Special Period Havana, which in turn led to the creation at this time of what Ana María Dopico has since described as an ambient or virtual city — ‘an atmosphere more than an *Urbis*’ (2002, 453). In the same article, Dopico considers Havana as a projection for Western fantasies, scrutinizing the 1990s ‘image boom’ and the way in which foreign visions of Cuba led to the creation and manipulation of ‘appetites and fantasies’ for the nation on the global market (2002, 452). The historical context preceding the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon is important and well documented. Havana was at a critical historical moment in the 1990s because living standards dropped alarmingly in the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, an event that triggered the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc and cessation of their massive economic subsidies to the Cuban economy. The ‘Período Especial en Tiempo de Paz’ was a term coined by Fidel Castro (1990, 1–5) and used to describe the macroeconomic crisis that followed the discontinuation of Soviet subsidies to Cuba.

Following the worst years of the Cuban Special Period, foreign image-makers (predominantly in the form of filmmakers and photographers) began to focus on a Special Period Cuba, with their lenses converging repeatedly on Havana. During this period, there was a significant growth in tourism in Havana and Cubans witnessed the reconceptualization and reconstruction of certain neighbourhoods. This was seen most noticeably in La Habana Vieja, as well as in other key tourist zones in the Cuban capital. Consequently, during this on-going Special Period, and since the end of the 1990s, so-called ‘authentic’ visual

¹ ‘[f]ue sobre todo una hábil maniobra comercial de manipulación de la nostalgia’ (Padura 2014).

representations of Cuba acquired a ‘distinct aesthetic quality’ (Hernandez-Reguant 2009, 13) and the proliferation of Cuban images on a global scale has since provided rich material for critics and scholars who have strived to challenge the theoretical boundaries of documentary film — rethinking and questioning the genre’s ‘truth claims’ in relation to Cuba and the way films shot on the island represent different realities to us.

In the wake of this, the beginning of the 2000s was a period when images of Cuba were re-affirmed in both film and photography, presenting Havana in nostalgic ruin from a western perspective. The notion of Havana standing in for all of Cuba at that time is addressed in the introduction to Antoni Kapcia’s *Havana: The Making of Cuban Culture*, in which he describes the city as a ‘Third World capital unusually protected from the worst distortions of globalization’ that has become ‘a social, cultural and political entity in its own right’ (2005, 3). The nation’s experience of the Special Period, he argues, ‘initially intensified the “closed” features of the preceding decades of relative isolation, freezing Havana in time’ (2005, 3) and this particular situation might be seen to have formed the basis for the ‘aesthetic’ described above. The image of the city at the end of the 1990s was perhaps best encapsulated by Wenders’s account of the Cuban capital in the accompanying book to *Buena Vista Social Club*, in which he writes: ‘[t]hat hand-coloured surface of Havana, all those layers of paint peeling off, [which] made the city appear as if under a spell, caught and frozen in time’ (2000, 14). As this description suggests, his and other image-makers’ fascination with Havana during this period centred not only on the ruin and decay of the city (often in the form of crumbling colonial buildings and 1950s American automobiles) but the way in which this dilapidation had seemingly been preserved — ‘frozen in time’ — and it was this aspect of the ‘aesthetic’ that appeared to prove most alluring to foreign filmmakers and photographers in the wake of the Buena Vista Social Club boom.

This, critics have argued, further powered the ‘internationalization’ of what has been referred to as a ‘Special Period aesthetic’ (Venegas 2009, 46). In turn, the viewer’s re-familiarization with existing visual constructs appeared to be in danger of becoming part of a process of displacement and sublimation, in which fervent spectacularization and apprehensive dislocation of the *Other* constituted part of a process of *cubanizando* (Cubanizing) the foreign subject² — a re-appropriation that situates two converging imaginaries (pre- and post-revolutionary Havana) resulting in a ‘double nostalgia’ for the city (Swanson 2011). Following the ‘thawing’ of relations between the United States and Cuba, the contemporary reality of this phenomenon has once again been underscored by Louis A. Pérez Jr. in a feature for the Cuban magazine *Temas* (2016), in which he describes the way Cuba has been marketed in the United States as:

[...] un destino muy remoto y distante, fuera del tiempo y el espacio [...] un sitio del Otro misterioso, al mismo tiempo un destino poscolonial y posrevolucionario, un país anteriormente prohibido y proscrito al que los norteamericanos de repente tienen acceso.

Therefore, it is important to note that there is also a certain temporality to this type of fetishization of Havana that not only links to the apparent rediscovery of Cuba at the end of the 1990s but also to existing notions of its capital city as one that is ‘frozen in time’, a concept that, as noted above, has been central to the continued exportation of Cuban images by the foreign image-maker that has taken place since the Cuban Special Period.

² Borrowing from Gustavo Pérez-Firmat’s modification of the term *Cubanidad* into the verb *Cubanizar*, meaning ‘to make Cuban something that isn’t’ (1997, 4).

Theoretical context

At this point it would be useful to explore the underpinnings of the music documentary film as a genre and the implications this has on the way in which the films discussed in this article may be interpreted. It emerged in the early 1960s and quickly surfaced as a key aspect in the development of U.S. direct cinema. It was associated specifically with the observational mode of documentary filmmaking, characterized by notions of realist filmmaking and photographic realism (Nichols 1991, 38–44), and as such the first music films and rockumentaries (then a neologism to describe the fusion of rock and documentary) were acclaimed for their ‘unmediated and unreconstructed access to the real’ (Beattie 2005, 25). In doing so, these films endeavoured to take the viewer ‘behind the scenes’, whilst at the same time directing the audience’s gaze upon specific elements of musical performance (21). Over the course of the last decade historians and musicologists have re-examined these seminal films in what until the 2000s had remained a largely overlooked space within film studies as a whole (Beattie 2005; Leonard and Strachan 2009; Stahl 2008). For example, critics have returned to D.A. Pennebaker’s *Don’t Look Back* (1967), the Maysles brothers’ *Monterey Pop* (1968) and *Gimme Shelter* (1969), and Michael Wadleigh’s *Woodstock* (1970). However, as Keith Beattie has observed, despite the notable shift in the ways in which the music film is now constructed, direct cinema as we understand it today has not dissipated completely into reality television as such but rather continues to be deployed, in various modified forms, via the music documentary film (2005, 21) and in other documentaries.

Whilst the late 1960s witnessed the development of a new documentary style rooted in the representation of the ‘real,’ as Marion Leonard and Robert Strachan have also pointed out, the music film has continued to be produced for promotional purposes with the aim to construct rather than to deconstruct (2009, 284–85) and, as my analysis below will reveal, the films discussed in this article are examples of this. However, as Leonard and Strachan also

observe, the documentary music film is not only instrumental in constructing popular cultural narratives about music but also to our understanding of the spaces represented on screen (2009, 289). Arguably, this is further problematized by the paradoxical nature of the filmic texts found in the genre and by the different spaces created within it (285). In the music documentary we encounter a first space (the 'real time' experience of the event itself), the second space (the space seen on screen) and a third 'virtual' space created by the filmmaker and experienced by the viewing public. Accordingly, it is the convergence of these three spaces in the music documentary film that perhaps deserves more serious interrogation. As has been observed in this field of study, with the advent of internet and multi-channel television, the entanglement of music and visual culture has intensified the music films' 'narrativization' of the world around us (Bennett 2004, 2) and has complicated the ways in which stories are told about the artists and presented to the viewer.

Therefore, given the complex nature of the genre, it would be advantageous here to differentiate between the music film and the concert film, both of which are typically amalgamated under the broader genre of the music documentary film. Throughout the history of the genre, music films have been linked to the mythologization of artists. However, due to the very nature of the 'backstage access' that these films have repeatedly strived to offer the viewer, as discussed above, they have also long been associated with truth and authenticity. At the same time, they have often resulted from dialogues that have taken place with filmmakers and have ordinarily been envisaged through the prisms of the artists in question (Marshall 2016). The auratic nature of live performances and their reproduction has been explored elsewhere (Auslander 2008; Sanden 2013) in relation to Walter Benjamin's theory of the 'aura' — discussed in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1968). This is significant with regards to the performance of the artist/musician seen on film, in which 'a sensory experience of distance' (Robinson 2013) is

created between the viewer and the performer and the traditional status of the performance as auratic is diminished as a result of the interminable audiovisual reproduction of live music performances (Auslander 2008, 55).

The term 'concert film' has been used to describe films, typically shot in the observational mode, in which the concert takes place on screen and is witnessed by the viewer in the same way that it would be by the audience at the live event. The three films discussed in this article may be categorized as belonging to both of these two sub-genres, with rockumentary-style, 'behind-the-scenes' footage being either interspersed throughout the artists' performances in the films or used to bookend concert footage. For this reason, it is useful then to distinguish between the three films as each of them function in distinctive ways and have different strategies and characteristics. They represent an amalgam of audiovisual operations linking political pilgrimage (Manic Street Preachers), acts of solidarity (Audioslave) and processes of re-branding (Simply Red) that are now linked to the artists' respective histories.

Consequently, due to their use of different narrative strategies, it would also be beneficial here to explore the ways in which each of these films are structured and presented to the viewer. Notable parallels exist between the three films discussed here and this not only links their respective representations of Havana but is also suggestive of their interreferentiality. This is due, first and foremost, to the similar motifs that are reinforced by the filmmakers in question. For example, in all three films the viewer is witness to an engagement between the foreign artist and the Cuban (either performing for the camera or on stage with the band). Additionally, observational footage provides specific visual cues in the form of touristic icons, during interviews with band members, in which the emphasis is on the foreigner's view of Cuba, guiding the audience through the artists' own interpretations of Havana. In turn, a synthesization seems to occur in which the artists and the filmmakers

themselves may be seen as constitutive of a reflection of the grandiose self — a term coined by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut in the field of self-psychology and explored in relation to ‘[o]mnipotence, grandiosity and exhibitionistic narcissism’ (Siegal 1996, 86). We see examples of this in the films as the artists and filmmakers locate themselves within idealized (and, at times, more salubrious) constructions of Havana but also this may be seen as ideologically manifested through the presence of the artists’ own music in these films.

This approach appears to mirror the set-up of *Buena Vista Social Club* in various ways. In Wenders’s film, the successful U.S.-based musician Ry Cooder gathers together a group of elderly musicians in Havana and the story follows the musicians from their modest surroundings in Havana to New York City, the finale climaxing with the collective’s performance at Carnegie Hall. The storyline is driven by the members’ personal accounts of their respective histories, shot digitally with mini-DV cameras, Digital Betacam and in colour steadicam footage. However, Cooder also plays a pivotal role in the narrative, not only through his visual presence but in his narration, in which he appears to be authorising Wenders’s portrayal of the city and its people.

In Russell Thomas’s documentary *Our Manics in Havana* (2001), which originally aired in the United Kingdom on Channel 4 on 24 March 2001, the filmmaker similarly blends different formats over the course of his documentary. He intersperses Super-8, 16mm, and handheld DV-camera footage of the band as they travel around the city of Havana, performing on stage at the Karl Marx theatre and in various interviews both at home in the United Kingdom and in Cuba. This documentary footage was made available and repackaged in the form of a DVD entitled *Louder Than War – Manic Street Preachers: Live in Cuba* (2001), which provided a more comprehensive overview of the trip, complete with the full concert film, a tour diary and exclusive interviews. Lawrence Jordan’s documentary *Out of Exile (Fuera de Exilio)* was also originally released as part of a DVD package entitled

Audioslave: Live in Cuba (2005) and the film was broadcast on U.S. television that same year. It was the first film released by the band, a successful super-group formed of the members of Rage Against the Machine (minus lead-singer Zack de la Rocha) alongside former Soundgarden vocalist Chris Cornell. Jordan's film is split into three sections: 'Fuera', 'De', and 'Exilio'. These each serve to break the documentary into three specific parts in which the band are seen travelling around the city, making cultural visits and performing.

As my analysis below will reveal, the viewer sees footage of the city in the observational mode and through interviews and talking heads of the band discussing their experience in Havana. These are filmed at various familiar tourist sites, including the Hotel Nacional, La Habana Vieja, La Plaza de Armas, La Plaza de la Catedral, La Plaza de la Revolución, the Teatro Karl Marx, Parque John Lennon and the Malecón (Havana's seafront avenue). Hamish Hamilton's *Simply Red – Live in Cuba!* follows suit in its representation of similar spaces. It was first released in 2005 as part of a DVD package that included the concert film, the documentary (part of which was shot two months before the performance itself) and interviews with the band and the filmmakers. The film was later re-issued as part of a 4-disc set in 2014. In the film, the band's usually eclectic musical influences (ranging from soul to reggae) appear stripped down and *cubanizadas* (Cubanized) in a way that transformed their popular hits into more carnivalesque hymns charged with recognizable rumba rhythms. In the documentary footage, the camera focuses primarily on the band's lead singer, Mick Hucknall, following him as he converses with local musicians, attends media events, and explores the city. The film also shows pre- and post-concert interviews with Hucknall and other performers, in addition to rehearsals and discussions relating to the set design of the Gran Teatro and it soon becomes clear that the trip represents a promotional manoeuvre linked to the band's then soon-to-be-released Cuban-influenced *Simplified* (2005) album.

Each of the films discussed above enable the viewer to experience the concert in question whilst also incorporating footage that has been repackaged by the filmmakers, informed by the way the artists themselves desire to be seen. For this reason, it is important to differentiate these films from the aforementioned early music documentary films made in the 1960s and 1970s, in which the understanding between the musician and the filmmaker is less apparent and a greater emphasis is placed on the films' representation of 'unreconstructed' footage to the viewer. There is a stark difference therefore between these early music documentary films and those which are discussed below — films which might arguably be seen as propagandistic branding exercises that are informed by each band's political outlook and world view, their nationality, and by their own understanding of their respective image and aesthetic. This is important because, as Michael Chanan has noted, taking Wenders's *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) as an example: '[t]he ambiguities of music have a habit of inveigling the music documentary into political subtexts beyond the control of the filmmaker' (2007, 223). As a result, these creators are implicated, in various ways, in their own cognitive mappings of Havana, whether through their representation of the diegetic city or via their respective geographies of production and dissemination. Thus, in the documentary film, as Chanan observes, 'like all cognitive maps, the places are real but the angles from which they're seen and the ways of moving around between them derive from the map-maker's own criteria — cultural, social, imaginary and symbolic' (2007, 78) and, in turn, these are four elements that will be scrutinised in my analysis of the texts examined below.

Havana and the music film

As noted above, *Our Manics in Havana* (2001), directed by Russell Thomas, documents the Manic Street Preachers' performance at the Teatro Karl Marx, through which the band reached notoriety in becoming the first Western rock band to play in post-1959 Havana.

Hailing originally from the small coal-mining village of Blackwood, South Wales, the band members and their families had been greatly affected by the Miner's Strike (1984–1985), one of the most fractious industrial disputes in British history. Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's confrontation with the National Union of Mineworkers led to an embittered and drawn-out coal strike, providing the backdrop to the band members' teenage years. The band was formed a year after the strike ended and the extent to which this dispute impacted upon their world outlook and music was notable. As such, their political ideology and left-wing views have continued to represent an important part of the band's overall aesthetic and are important when considered in relation to their performance in Havana.

At the time of their concert in Cuba, the band had also long maintained an anti-American posture in their image and lyrics. In the 1990s, the Manic Street Preachers had failed to break into the U.S. market and in 1995, following the release of their much acclaimed second album *The Holy Bible*, the band were forced to cancel their North American tour following the disappearance of their guitarist Richey Edwards. Five years later, just months after the success of *Buena Vista Social Club*, in January 2000, the Manic Street Preachers released a limited-edition single on CD and vinyl entitled 'The Masses Against The Classes' — a single that was heralded as a return to the band's punk ethic. Without promotion from the band or an official video, the single rocketed up the UK charts becoming the first number one of the new millennium. Their forthcoming album, *Know Your Enemy* (2001), had the working title *Fidel* and was highly political, drawing upon pro-Castro themes with tracks entitled 'Baby Elián' and 'Freedom of Speech Won't Feed My Children'. The 'Masses Against The Classes' single had also become instantly recognizable for its cover, the Cuban flag with the star removed, suggesting that the song itself had more to do with the band's own socialist ideology rather than that of Cuba itself. However, the single would prove to be an instigator for a larger Havana project which over the course of the

following year would culminate on 17 February 2001 when the Manic Street Preachers played a concert to a sold-out Karl Marx theatre in Havana, in front of approximately five thousand people.

The choice of this venue seemed fitting and appeared to match the band's image and profile at the time. Formerly known as the Blanquita and later the Teatro Charles Chaplin, the Teatro Karl Marx was given its current name following the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and from thereon was considered predominantly to be a venue for political events. This is due to the fact that before the construction of the Palacio de Convenciones in 1979 the Teatro Karl Marx had been the principal meeting space for the *Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular* (the Cuban parliament). As a result, despite having played host to occasional pop and rock performances, including Carlos Valera and Buena Fe (in addition to western acts such as the Manic Street Preachers), the building had continued to represent a space that was rooted to Cuban political discourse. Upon playing the Teatro Karl Marx, the Manic Street Preachers became the first mainstream western rock band to play Cuba and affirmed themselves amongst a select group of popular music acts who themselves had played landmark concerts on the island over the course of the twentieth century. For example, fifty years earlier, the celebrated pianist Liberace had also performed at the auditorium before setting off on his 1956 European tour (Alston 2014) and twenty years later Billy Joel famously took part in the Havana Jam concert that was held at the venue in 1979 (Flippo 1979).

The Manic Street Preachers' performance was, for the reasons set out above, more politically-loaded and therefore was presented in the media as tantamount to an affirmation of their socialist ideology. This was exemplified in a review of the concert written by the music critic Simon Price, for whom the concert represented either 'a clenched fist, a call to arms against creeping Americanisation', or 'a sophisticated and well-worked publicity stunt' (2001, 2). The political nature of the band's performance is also underscored in Thomas's

film during footage of the Manic Street Preachers' meeting with President Fidel Castro. This was facilitated in part by Peter Hain, who at the time was serving as a Foreign Office minister in Her Majesty's Government.

Four years later, *Audioslave: Live in Cuba* (2005) was released, and its accompanying documentary *Out of Exile*, directed by Lawrence Jordan, recorded the band's performance at the Plaza Tribuna Antiimperialista José Martí to approximately sixty thousand Cubans — the first performance by a U.S. rock-band on Cuban soil since the 1959 Cuban Revolution. The concert was orchestrated as part of a cultural exchange with the joint authorization of the Instituto Cubano de la Música, the Ministerio de Cultura de la República de Cuba, the United States Treasury Department, and the Music Bridges organisation. Notably, in their longest concert to date, the band would perform hits from both the Rage Against the Machine and Soundgarden back catalogues, something that they had refused to do before, and this was seen as an additional mark of solidarity with the Cuban people in attendance. Indeed, in his favourable write-up of the concert for *Granma*, Joaquín Borges-Triana (2005, 1) borrowed from José Lezama Lima's phrasing, referring to the concert as 'una fiesta innombrable' offered by 'una grupacion que transpira adrenalina por los cuatros constados'.

As with the choice of location for the Manic Street Preachers' performance, the selection of venue for Audioslave's concert was unsurprising. Found at the intersection of Havana's Malecón, Calzada and streets N and M, the Tribuna Antiimperialista was opened as a public event space in Vedado, Havana in April 2000, situated conveniently in the Plaza de la Dignidad in close proximity to what was then known as the United States Interests Building. The wall of 130 flags situated behind the stage, visible in footage of Audioslave's performance but later removed in 2009, was initially erected both in memory of victims of U.S.-related injustice and to obstruct view of anti-Cuban propaganda that was being shown by an electronic ticker on the fifth floor of the U.S. Interests Building. One of the first

demonstrations to be held at the Tribuna Antiimperialista had been a rally calling for the return of the then six-year-old Elián González. The child's mother had died attempting to take him from Cuba to Florida on a raft and extended family members in Miami refused to accede to his father's wishes to repatriate Elián to the island. The event space would also later be used as a venue for public speeches and performances, including a concert in March 2010 by the popular pro-independence Puerto Rican hip-hop and alternative reggaeton artist Calle 13.

Released the year of Audioslave's trip, *Simply Red – Cuba!* (2005), directed by the British filmmaker Hamish Hamilton, chronicled the 2005 visit of the popular British soul band Simply Red to Havana, led by their Mancunian vocalist, Mick Hucknall. Hamilton — an established international director and producer known for his multicamera coverage of live events such as the Super Bowl Halftime Show, the Academy Awards, and the MTV Music Awards — employs a notably high-end production style that lends his footage an elegant and sophisticated sheen. Continuing the trend of the other historical visits made by the aforementioned groups, Simply Red would become one of the first non-classical western acts to be invited to play at the Gran Teatro de La Habana. Again, this choice of performance venue is important as it impacts on the overall aesthetic of the film as a whole. Located on Paseo del Prado (a tree-lined colonial pedestrian boulevard) in Havana, the theatre first opened in 1838 and is currently home of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba (1950 to present). It has also hosted the Festival de Ballet de La Habana since 1960 in addition to the most important ballet and opera performances by classical Cuban and international artists held in the city since the mid-nineteenth century. Originally known as the Galician Centre of Havana, the building was first constructed to serve as a social hub for Galician immigrants arriving from Spain and, in turn, a building was constructed around the existing theatre (the Sala García Lorca) ensuring its preservation. It was also at the same venue that President Obama gave his

keynote speech aimed at the Cuban people on his 2016 trip to Havana. For this reason, the theatre has been recognized internationally for its grand architecture and décor and, as my discussion below will observe, this plays a fundamental part in the staging and representation of Simply Red's performance to the film viewer.

'Old Havanaland'

Broadcast on television and released as DVDs in the years following the Buena Vista Social Club boom at the end of the 1990s, the three films discussed here may be seen as exemplary of the way in which a 'Special Period aesthetic' was further extended into the 2000s and beyond. The films in question are constitutive of visual constructions that incorporate a synthesis of different filmic styles, techniques, formats, and documentary modes. These include the use of observational footage (discussed above) and the performative mode, which is defined by its portrayal of enactments and/or re-enactments of spaces and places that the viewer might not otherwise experience and in which techniques from fiction-filmmaking are used (Nichols 2001, 130–37).

The three films are also interlinked in their depiction of the well-worn touristic sites and sights of Havana (from the Plaza de la Revolución to La Habana Vieja). Following its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982, La Habana Vieja was re-developed in the early 1990s as one of the city's primary tourist locations. Importantly, whilst the post-1989 crisis had affected Havana badly, the Plan Maestro (para la Revitalización Integral de la Habana Vieja) at the end of 1994 led to the redefinition of the neighbourhood, providing an artistic space for street performers and musicians (Kapcia 2005, 182–85). Furthermore, in 1995, La Habana Vieja was proclaimed an 'Area of High Significance for Tourism', placing additional focus on the zone as a themed space later described as an 'Old Havanaland' (Goldberger 1998). This label suggested the neighbourhood as a hyperreal space, in which

the revival and preservation of buildings in Havana was completed with the sole aim of bringing in tourist dollars. This type of regulated marketing and selling of Havana to the tourist brings to mind Jean Baudrillard's reading of Disneyland, which he saw as an imaginary space serving as 'a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real' (1983, 25). Goldberger's label of 'Old Havanaland' correlates with Dopico's description of Havana during this time as a 'a visual and virtual historical theme park' (2002, 452), a space which has come to represent a visually objectified location that has been, and continues to be, 'endlessly reproduced and recaptured' by the foreign lens as part of the accumulation of tourist imagery (Urry 2001, 3). Thus, by seeking out and recirculating pre-existing images which have been seen before, the three films discussed form part of an on-going cycle in which the images presented on screen are subsequently associated with the 'real' touristic spaces of Havana.

Other critics working along the same lines have also observed that the tourist's perception of Havana is guided profoundly by media portrayals of the city and by visual elements of the tourist landscape and exotic pastimes that are played out upon an idiosyncratic *mise-en-scène* (Scarpaci and Portela 2009, 112). As a result, and to recall Lefebvre's theory on the imaginary city described above, a theatrical space emerges in which the rhythms of the street appear to be poetically reconstructed by the filmmaker and images of city-life in Havana (the social, historical and spatial) may become confused with and inseparable from the geographic real (Lefebvre 1991, 209). Additionally, the filmic spaces presented in scenes such as those analysed below are also emblematic of what the cultural theorist Homi Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture* (1994) as hybrid socio-cultural and liminal (or 'in-between') spaces, in which the real and imagined become blurred, and the cultural differences between the filmmaker (the foreigner) and the *Other* are articulated to the viewer whilst also contributing to the formation of imagined 'constructions' of cultural and

national identity in the Western imaginary. Jumping between the private and public, the past and present, images in these scenes are interwoven and provide the viewer with a sort of ‘interstitial intimacy’ (Bhabha 1994, 13) with Havana and its people.

This is exemplified in both *Our Manics in Havana* and *Simply Red: Cuba!*, as the filmmakers blend digital footage with film shot in the Super-8 format. The viewer is witness to Havana street scenes (older *máquinas*, classic American cars being used as taxis, school children playing amongst crumbling colonial buildings, and men playing *el dominó*) — clichéd and stereotypical images of *lo cotidiano* but also visual representations of *Otherness* (social actors that are redolent of the ‘characters’ presented to the viewer in *Buena Vista Social Club*) and of a postcolonial exotic (Huggan 2001). Furthermore, the somnial nature of the Super-8 footage employed here by the filmmakers is also entangled in this process of layering varied representations of the city, in that it is a dated format which originates with the early handheld cameras of the tourist. Consequently, this footage also has the effect of nostalgizing the filmmaker’s representation of the city, imbuing Havana with a dreamlike quality as a result of the distorted, grainy, and blurred visual characteristics of the format. This, again, appears to mimic the digitally re-mastered, overexposed and colourized footage of Havana that is seen in *Buena Vista Social Club*, which the late film critic Phillip French (1999) described as having a ‘crude’ quality.

This occurs similarly in *Out of Exile*, as the tourist space is represented in a pastiche or collage of footage shot in the observational mode, and the members of Audioslave are seen visiting different locations in Havana. This footage is presented in a heavily stylised and carefully edited way that plays out in the film in fast cuts — characteristic of post-MTV filmmaking and shot on handheld cameras —, which are seen in the footage stealing Kodakized moments and touristic snapshots. At the same time, at various points the band comment on what they call the ‘beautiful tragedy’ of Cuba and in the second section of the

film, Chris Cornell refers to the ‘small image’ North Americans have of Cuba as a result of their political position in relation to the country. The apparently adventitious documentary footage that correlates with these comments (and talking heads of the band speaking from touristic spaces) shows an Afro-Cuban woman cleaning in a dilapidated kitchen, paint crumbling from the walls whilst rickety kitchen units surround her. She sings to herself, unaware of the camera, before realizing its presence and waving before continuing to sing and clean. This, in turn, is representative of a binarism that is redolent of a scene from *Our Manics in Havana*, in which the viewer sees close-ups of heavily cartoonized Afro-Cuban figurines at a tourist market, clad in bright clothing and chomping on huge cigars. In a cutaway, Thomas correlates this image immediately with an actual Afro-Cuban woman, also smoking a cigar.

This is also echoed in *Simply Red: Cuba!* in footage that jumps between Hucknall being photographed outside the Gran Teatro and Super-8 footage of a cigar-smoking *habanera* (a pseudo-Disneyfied figure seen in numerous visual representations of the city since the 1990s). Scenes such as these — aligning objects such as the mass-produced souvenirs sold in Havana tourist markets (a fundamental part of the city’s tourist economy) with its people — entail problematic associations. Moreover, by positing *habaneros* as objects of cultural hybridity in which the foreign visions of the filmmaker appear to be attempting to make sense of the identity of the Cuban, these depictions might also be seen as fetishizations of the subaltern subject as *Other*. In these scenes, the romanticization of the social actors on screen involves homogenizing the city-dweller in a way that appears once again to mirror the old world visual anachronisms found in *Buena Vista Social Club*.

In turn, these scenes might also be viewed more broadly as emblematic of a double bind situation faced by the filmmaker/artist and the Cuban, in which the performative nature of the *habanero/a* comes to the fore. As Dopico notes, through costume, pose, and actions,

this type of characterization of the Cuban subject offers a 'marketable protocol, a visual diplomacy of gesture, glance, and partial revelation' in which:

Cubans well-versed in tourist economies of the Special Period become photography's objects with an ironic confidence in its currency, its set rate of exchange of subject for image, and its universal standard as the coinage of entry into the global market. Photography thus becomes analogous to the dollar as recognizable currency, its guaranteed circulation providing an unarticulated form (both severed from states and silent in its power) and a mobile signifying technique. (2002, 466)

As a result, and to paraphrase Urry, the filmmaker's visual knowledge of the subject thus gives him power, momentarily, over the postcolonial exotic subject (2001, 127). Indeed, as was the case with Wenders's film, the circulation of these music documentary films did notably take place outside of Cuba and for this reason these filmic representations of the city and its people might be seen to be propagating a fantasy that is aimed solely at a foreign audience. The films were not screened in Cuban cinemas nor were they broadcast on national television (as they were in the United Kingdom and the United States). This was due in part to the fact that, as with Buena Vista Social Club, there was limited circulation of the different groups' music on the island, at a time when Latin American rap and reggaeton acts (in addition to other artists from more popular genres) were enjoying greater popularity amongst young people.

Additionally, in all three films, the artists are seen traversing the city in classic North American automobiles in a way that again reinforces the notion of Havana as a type of consumable geography. This staged, almost Hollywoodian, footage would appear to

constitute filmmaking in the observational mode, in which the various performers are seen using objects of tourist nostalgia, relics that are suggestive ‘of the tranquillity of a necessarily slower pace of life, slowed less by the late arrival of modernity than by the stubborn rejection of capitalist technology’ (Whitfield 2008, 28). This stylized approach is also replicated in both *Our Manics in Havana* and *Simply Red: Cuba!* in the artists’ respective visits to Radio Progreso, an edifice that provokes a certain archaeolatry in both Thomas and Hamilton. For instance, an establishing shot of the Radio Progreso building in the two films alludes further to the clichéd perception of Havana as a city ‘frozen in time’ and the camera’s highlighting of its name, ‘Radio Progreso’, materializes as an ironic play on the country’s supposed underdevelopment. This is again indicated in both films by the filmmakers’ close-up footage of the dated equipment used at the station. Hence, the way in which pre-existing imaginaries of Havana are mirrored in these films is suggestive of a visual dialogue taking place between the filmmaker and existing representations of the city, whereby various Havana imaginaries are revisioned and reaffirmed.

Importantly, these imaginaries are also played out in the scenes of the performances and concerts themselves. These take place at the aforementioned venues in the films; sites which constitute the locations of exchange between the foreign artist and the Cuban. In turn, the consumable idea of Havana in these scenes is charged by the desire of the filmmaker and external artists to localize their performance and thereby heighten the authenticity of their films. As noted above, the concert footage for Thomas’s film, for example, shot on 16mm, with camera equipment borrowed from TV stations in Cuba, has a blurred and distorted quality as a result of a faulty camera magazine that was used as the main camera on the night of the performance. Additionally, we see handheld DV-cameras situated throughout the crowd that recall the motifs of the aforementioned early seminal music documentary films, in which the camera is often insinuated into the action. Both the 16mm and digital film used in

these concert scenes have a muddled quality that replicates the textures of the earlier Super-8 footage seen in the documentary, further contributing to a process of distortion, and temporal, social, and spatial dislocation.

In this concert footage, the presence of the Cuban flag as a backdrop is an important signifier (as it is in the other films discussed here). It was a gesture on the part of the band that drew comment from the Cuban national press and highlighted by Eduardo Montes de Oca in his review of the performance in the Cuban newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*. In the article, he equated the Manic Street Preachers' performance in Havana to 'un ajiaco sabroso' (a tasty melting pot) (2001, 1) that should be seen as a symbolic example of transculturation. This emphasis on the theme of solidarity also became the focus of Audioslave's performance at the Tribuna Antiimperialista, situated in front of the United States Interests Section, since 2015 the U.S. Embassy in Havana; a space, as alluded to above, that has been renowned for propagandistic audiovisual displays of force and intent between Cuba and the United States. For this reason, the proximity of the concert to the U.S. interests building was underscored by Pedro de la Hoz in *Granma* (2005, 1), who saw the staging of the performance as a defiant public response from the Cuban state in the face of the U.S. blockade and economic sanctions still in place against the island. Furthermore, despite the band's insistence that their trip represented some form of cultural exchange (rather than a political statement), the revolutionary dimension of Audioslave's visit is also present at various points in the narrative in *Out of Exile*. For instance, we see footage of the band visiting the Plaza de la Revolución and standing beneath the José Martí Memorial in Vedado. In this space, the band appears to be aware of the symbolic nature of the landmark as Lawrence's camera captures touristic snapshots. This footage is also intercut with newsreel footage of Fidel Castro speaking at the podium in the square, creating a back and forth between a pre- and post-Special Period Havana. In the opening sequence of the film we also see a wide establishing shot of Havana

Bay, followed by images of a desolate José Martí International Airport and footage of a billboard that reveals the slogan ‘El mundo necesita la globalización de la solidaridad’. This sets the tone for a film in which the filmmaker, Lawrence, appears to allow his camera to linger on signifiers that situate Havana as one of the last vestiges of the Cold War. This again is redolent of observational footage from *Buena Vista Social Club*, in which Wenders’s camera fixes onto similar slogans and uses these cultural codes as shorthand to remind the viewer of the Cuban government’s rejection of capitalism and their inculcation of a siege mentality. Notably, these billboards would often incorporate anti-imperialist messages and affirm the Cuban people’s solidarity in spite of the longstanding constraints placed on the island by the United States that have been described above (the U.S. *bloqueo* and economic sanctions against Cuba, for example).

Footage of the concert in *Simply Red – Cuba!* is markedly different to the political symbolism attached to both Audioslave and the Manic Street Preachers’ respective concerts. In the opening sequence of Hamilton’s film, Hucknall is driven to the Gran Teatro in a green Cadillac at dusk. Establishing shots of the city and the Havana skyline are interrupted by quick cuts of the artist travelling to the concert by car, within which additional lighting has been used to illuminate the singer’s face. This is heightened somewhat by the enhanced colourization of the naturalesque Havana twilight in the scene that constitutes a carefully orchestrated cinematic first sequence in which the lines between the observational and performative modes of documentary filmmaking are further blurred. Moreover, Hucknall’s entrance even appears to mimic the fictional introduction sequences seen in other music documentary films, a common motif that is used in the genre; for example, the opening scene in Prince’s *Sign ‘o’ the Times* (1987) in which the artist fights off a bunch of hoodlums in a street outside a concert hall before turning up on stage. This is re-imagined in a clearly choreographed set-piece in Hamilton’s film, in which, upon the singer’s arrival at the Gran

Teatro, children run from the middle of the street away from the oncoming vehicle, as Hucknall disembarks the car and enters through the stage door. The singer is seen ambling onto the stage through the postscenium in the mould of a 1930s crooner. This is matched in the observational footage of the artist strolling through La Habana Vieja, in which he strikes a dandyish pose in his trilby and white linen suit. This look also seems to fit with the location of the concert itself, the neo-baroque Gran Teatro, which is paramount both to the representation of the city in the film and the way the performance is staged.

The staging for the concert was the result of an extensive production design process, in which the Sala García Lorca was transformed into a Hollywoodian, and arguably hyperrealistic, backdrop that appeared to bring together different elements of the director and artist's envisioning of various Havana imaginaries, and, as noted above, these ideas are discussed on-screen in the documentary itself. In turn, the filmmaker transmutes at this point into a *régisseur*, coordinating the chronosynchronicity of various Havana imaginaries. As such, the staging seen in the film appears to mimic elements of the Havana scenography outlined in the observational footage from the film (using props in the form of mock up ruins and a dilapidated veranda). This staging certainly did not go unnoticed and, in his review of the concert in *Juventud Rebelde*, José Luis Estrada Betancourt picked up on the cinematic nature of the concert, referring to the staging as 'ambientado con luces inteligentes (inteligentemente utilizadas)', suggesting that the lighting was used to such an effect that it transformed the Sala García Lorca into a different performance space entirely (2005, 6). Indeed, at one point in the film, the stage is transmogrified completely, revealing a projection of images of city-life in Havana playing out behind the band. Michel Hernández referred to this moment in *Granma* as 'uno de los momentos más descollantes' (2005, 6). However, this literal and allegorical re-staging is, one might suggest, emblematic of the hybridization seen taking place elsewhere in these films. Thus, it may also be envisaged as representative of a

fetishization of the city-space that could be seen as a construct within a construct (staging taking place within the confines of the music documentary film), in which the space used by the artist and the filmmaker is spectacularized, further blurring the lines between the 'real' and 'imagined' Havana represented on screen.

Conclusion

Since the 'thawing' in relations between the United States and Cuba, described at the beginning of this article, the circulation of visual narratives and national imaginaries pertaining to Cuba has increased exponentially. This has been due, in part, to the growing number of celebrity visits, cultural exchanges and new business initiatives, reflective of mounting U.S. interest in the island, that have been spotlighted by the western media. This, in turn, has fomented an insatiable appetite for visual texts that, as I have exemplified in my analysis, constitute both visually alluring yet highly problematic representations of the island and have led to the extension of a 'Special Period aesthetic' (Venegas 2009, 46) well into the new millennium. Consequently, these texts have formed part of an expanding visual syntax that remains in danger of further fetishizing the 'real' Havana as a result of the multiplication and repetition of pre-existing Cuban images. As José Quiroga has observed, an entire media archive devoted to Cuban images has been compacted within the interactive and virtual realm of the internet (2005, 3). For this reason, the dissemination of visual representations of Havana, such as the music documentary films discussed here, and the manner in which Cuban imaginaries are now projected, is a burgeoning topic of study for scholars in the field. In the case of these films and their export to global markets, the construction and consumption of these projected imaginaries is further problematized due to the way in which the genre is often marketed as a vehicle for transparency. However, as my analysis here has attested, the music documentary film does not through its categorization necessarily represent

an authentic reality to the viewer. Therefore, it is only through returning to these cognitive mappings of Havana, and by re-interpreting the way in which these visual texts represent ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ spaces to us, that we may look to develop a clearer understanding as to how and why we have come to see the city as we do.

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Hacia finales de los años noventa las llamadas ‘auténticas’ representaciones visuales de Cuba, y específicamente de La Habana, adquirirían una ‘cualidad estética distintiva’ (Hernandez-Reguant 2009). Esto se vio en la proliferación mundial de imágenes cubanas, presentadas predominantemente por creadores extranjeros, que amenazaban a las representaciones de la isla y su capital. Con el fin de explorar este fenómeno, este artículo analizará tres diferentes documentales musicales producidos por realizadores extranjeros: *Our Manics in Havana* (2001), *Out of Exile* (2005) and *Simply Red – Cuba!*

(2005). Se propone que estos documentales son emblemáticos de un tipo de narración espacial que confina al espectador a una visión limitada de determinados sitios turísticos y lugares de interés en La Habana, reconocibles sólo como resultado de las imágenes recurrentes que dan forma a estas zonas en el imaginario mundial. A su vez, mediante un examen de la producción, inscripción y consumo de las diferentes narrativas visuales, se tendrá en cuenta sus diferentes, y a veces opuestas, representaciones de ‘La Habana auténtica’. Por otra parte, se propondrá que estas representaciones han contribuido a la construcción de una imagen problemática, fetichista, y en última instancia reductiva de la ciudad, la cual tiene poca relación con la realidad geográfica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cuba, Habana, documental, cine, música

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