

Epicentro' Review: They Are Cuba

The Oscar-nominated documentarian Hubert Sauper explores vestiges of foreign presence in Cuba, from the ground up.

By Ben Kenigsberg

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Epicentro Directed by Hubert Sauper | Documentary | 1h 48m

The Austrian-born Hubert Sauper has made two remarkable documentaries on colonialism, each employing a powerful central metaphor. “Darwin’s Nightmare” (2005) draws an analogy between foreign plunderers of Tanzania and an invasive species of fish. “We Come as Friends” (2015) compares the investors descending on South Sudan (and Sauper’s visit) to an onslaught from another planet.

“Epicentro” takes a similarly free-form approach to exploring vestiges of imperialism in Cuba, a country Sauper portrays as having been picked apart by Spain, the United States and finally privileged tourists — including Sauper himself. The connections he draws are unexpected and frequently fascinating, although in this film the synthesis isn’t as clear as in the others.



The opening narration links the invention of motion pictures with the start of the Spanish-American War at nearly the same time; it notes that most of us have witnessed war “through the hypnotizing prism of cinema.”

Reminders of the past — a hotel named after Theodore Roosevelt, a structure a passer-by identifies as a former sugar refinery for Coca-Cola — are everywhere. Sauper tends to explore history from the perspectives of individuals. A young girl explains the Platt Amendment, through which the United States, after Spain’s defeat, essentially granted itself permission to intervene in Cuban affairs. A woman on the street sounds off about foreign politicians “who like war and wealth” and don’t care about people.

Isolated moments of joy exist alongside squalor, as when Oona Castilla Chaplin, who has a history in Cuba, watches her grandfather’s film “The Great Dictator” with children. (Speaking of dictators: “Epicentro” captures the country mourning Fidel Castro, who died in 2016.) Whether Sauper’s travels delivered a cohesive movie this time is debatable, but what he does find is always interesting.

Epicentro

Not rated. In Spanish, English and German, with subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 48 minutes. Watch through Kino Marquee.

Epicentro**Director** Hubert Sauper**Writer** Hubert Sauper**Star** Oona Chaplin**Running Time** 1h 48m**Genre** Documentary

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