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## MUSIC, DOCUMENTARIES AND GLOBALIZATION: *FROM WORLD MUSIC TO WORLD CINEMA*

### *Música, Documentales y Globalización: De la música del mundo al cine del mundo*

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper deals with the relationship between sound and image as expressed in the cinematic genre of music documentary. In particular, it tries to explore the way in which musical cultures are audiovisually expressed through filmic representation of music performances and artists/groups portraits. By applying a critical and comparative approach, the films *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) and *Café de los Maestros* (2008) become vehicles to investigate images and sounds of music in everyday life, with an emphasis on the impact of globalization and commercialization during their creation and interpretation procedures. The focus is on the commercial exploitation of these films in the context of world capitalism and the way in which it influences the construction of visual representations of non-European musical cultures and identities, as cultural industry shares today a comparable postmodern situation through the concepts of «world music» and «world cinema». In this light, the paper discusses Latin American (Cuban and Argentine) identities and local music cultures which spread internationally via films and gain a place in the global music scene. Consequently, it points towards issues of

authenticity, nostalgia, exoticism, hybridity, folklorization, and the Western domination upon music as well as films.

*Keywords:* music documentary; world music; world cinema; Latin America; globalization.

RESUMEN. Este trabajo trata de la relación entre sonido e imagen expresada en el género cinematográfico del documental musical. En particular, trata de explorar la forma en que las culturas musicales se expresan audiovisualmente a través de la representación fílmica de actuaciones musicales y retratos de artistas/grupos. Aplicando un enfoque crítico y comparativo, las películas *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) y *Café de los Maestros* (2008) se convierten en vehículos para investigar imágenes y sonidos de la música en la vida cotidiana, con énfasis en el impacto de la globalización y la comercialización durante su desarrollo, procedimientos de creación e interpretación. La atención se centra en la explotación comercial de estas películas en el contexto del capitalismo mundial y la forma en que influye en la construcción de representaciones visuales de culturas e identidades musicales no europeas, ya que la industria cultural comparte hoy una situación posmoderna a través de los conceptos de «música del mundo» y «cine del mundo». Bajo esta luz, el artículo analiza las identidades latinoamericanas (cubana y argentina) y las culturas musicales locales que se difunden internacionalmente a través del cine y ganan un lugar en la escena musical mundial. En consecuencia, apunta hacia cuestiones de autenticidad, nostalgia, exotismo, hibridez, folclorización y la dominación occidental sobre la música y las películas.

*Palabras clave:* documental musical; música del mundo; cine del mundo; América latina; globalización.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: MUSIC DOCUMENTARIES AND «WORLD MUSIC»

Documentary is the principal genre of nonfiction cinema par excellence. Sounds and images of these films are projected as actual facts, representing the world recorded by the cinematic camera (Rogers, 2015: 1). The tradition of the documentary as a genre was associated with realistic film techniques that sought as little creative intervention as possible and focused on direct and unmediated representation of events and reactions in front of the camera (Barnouw, 1983;

Nichols, 1991; Renov, 1993). This practice had a significant impact on the use of music in these films, as several filmmakers regarded that there was no place for it in the documentary. For them, this restraint applied especially to dramatic music but also to additional sound effects –all these considered to be in conflict with the naturalism of the aesthetics of this particular genre (Rogers, 2015: 2). Gradually, however, certain theorists started questioning the possibility of an objective representation of reality in documentaries. As the notion of subjectivity began to gain ground, documentarists were influenced by various fiction film traditions and, thus, shifted the weight to more poetic cinematic forms. In this context, music and sound design have been widely used pretty much like in feature films (Rogers, 2015: 4-6). Emphasis was placed on the ability of music to define the narrative and create emotions, which made visual experience quite personal to the viewers (Rogers, 2015: 4-9; Corner, 2002).

Music documentaries have been regarded as films with close interaction between reality cinema and art form (Chanan, 2013: 337). It is a distinct cinematic subgenre, which has also evolved into a key element of modern popular music culture. In their early stages, music documentaries were experimental to a large extent, not simply demonstrating musical performances but dealing with the musical object itself and negotiating the social context of music creation. However, from the 1970s onwards, both the means and the abilities of documentary filmmakers have been largely expanded. That was when music industry and television were introduced in documentary production and promotion (Chanan, 2013: 382-383). With the development of concert films, music videos and MTV, music documentaries have been linked to popular music and celebrity culture and are still considered to serve –first and foremost– commercial and advertising goals (Edgar *et al.*, 2013: 13-14; Chanan, 2013: 377).

This paper looks into the relationship between sound and image as expressed in music documentaries. In particular, it tries to explore the way in which musical cultures are audiovisually revealed through the filmic representation of music performances and artists or groups portraits. By applying a critical and comparative approach, the documentaries *Buena Vista Social Club* (Wenders, 1999) and *Café de los Maestros* (Kohan, 2008) become vehicles to investigate images and sounds of music in actual everyday life, paying attention to the impact of globalization and commercialization during their creation and interpretation procedures. The emphasis of the analysis is on the commercial exploitation of these films in the context of the world market, as well as on the way in which the current West-centric popular mass media tradition influences the construction of visual representations of non-European musical cultures and identities through the conception of the label of «world music». In addition, this study deals with «world cinema» as an etiquette which has been employed to describe cultural morphemes that are equivalent to the commercialized notion of «world music».

## 2. BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB AND CAFÉ DE LOS MAESTROS: THE CDS, THE FILMS, THEIR HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The music album *Buena Vista Social Club* was released in 1997 by the British record company World Circuit Records. It includes a CD with Cuban songs based mainly on the traditional genre *son*, but also other genres such as *bolero*, *guajira* and *danzón* (Image 1). This was the first global commercial success of Cuban music, selling approximately 5.000.000 copies worldwide in the year of its release and also winning a Grammy for «Best Tropical Latin Performance» (Fairley, 2009; Kavoori, 2018; Garlitz, 2005: 71). This triumph was labeled as the beginning of the so-called «Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon», including the homonymous documentary directed by Wim Wenders, as well as additional aural and visual products that followed, such as albums, photos, movies, etc. (Kent, 2019: 149).

Wenders's film is an introduction to the Buena Vista Social Club artists. In February 1998, American musician and producer Ry Cooder, along with his son Joachim, returned to Havana to record a new project titled *Buena Vista Social Club Presents Ibrahim Ferrer* and met again with the musicians of the hit album. The documentary captures snapshots from studio rehearsals, concerts in Amsterdam and New York, as well as interviews about these Cuban musicians. Wenders tours Havana and brings us images of the city and its people, focusing on the music protagonists who tell the story of their careers (Erllich, 2016: 126).

On the other hand, the music album *Café de los Maestros* was recorded between 2003 and 2004 and was released in 2005 by Surco/Universal Music Argentina (Image 1). It consists of two parts, which include about 50 new performances of *tango* pieces from the 1940s and the 1950s, presented by veteran musicians (Amuchastegui, 2006: 9-10). These works were carefully selected by two music producers, Gustavo Santaolalla and Gustavo Mozzi. Santaolalla was the architect of the overall project. *Café de los Maestros* received the Grammy Latino for «Best Tango Album» and the Premios Gardel for «Production of the Year» and «Best Group or Orchestra Tango Album». It was followed by an emblematic recital at the Colón Theater in Buenos Aires in 2006, the release of the homonymous book in the same year and the filming of the 2008 documentary *Café de los Maestros*, directed by Miguel Kohan (Rosenberg, 2014: 152-153).

The documentary is based on the backstage processes during the production of the album and the concert at the Colón Theater. The camera attends the rehearsals, the recordings and the performances of *tango* pieces, while at the same time it follows the artists through personal interviews that present aspects of their daily lives and their relationship with music, thus giving evidence of the social and cultural significance of the genre. The film underlines the importance of this unique occasion to bring together older generations of master musicians and singers in order to revive earlier musical styles of the golden era of *tango* and,

thus, highlight the complexity and historicity of these practices. As Miller (2014: 23) clearly states, «Santaolalla's tradition-honoring *Café de los Maestros* offers a lushly produced aural and visual archive of *tango* as the exquisite and unique expression of a generation that will soon pass away».

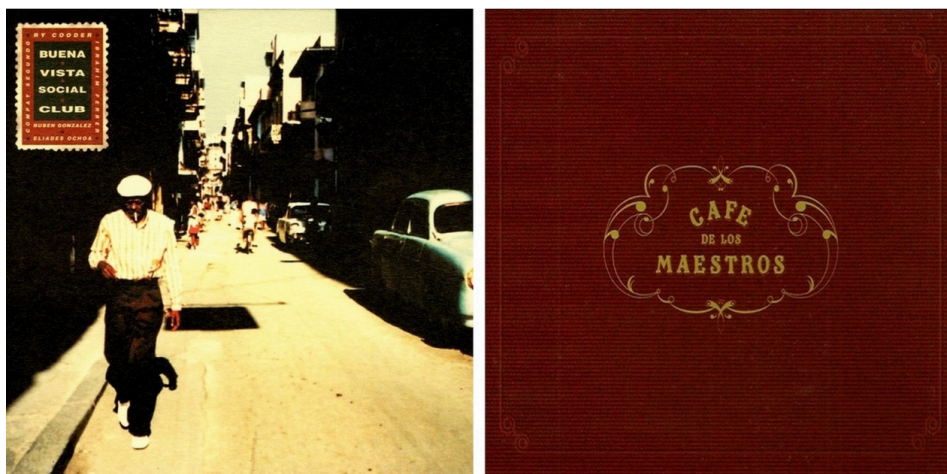


Image 1. *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Café de los Maestros* CD covers  
(<https://www.discogs.com/>).

*Buena Vista Social Club* and *Café de los Maestros* are two audibly rich documentaries (Image 2). Generally, the sound in these documentaries serves their visual purposes, with a particular focus on the concepts of «nostalgia» and «authenticity». The viewer perceives sounds from the rehearsals in the studio, the concerts, the houses of the artists, as well as other indoor and outdoor spaces in which they move and perform. Furthermore, the directors employ several shots from the abovementioned recital performances, which give the impression of these two films being «concert documentaries» dominated by songs from albums and a multitude of sounds, diegetic (actual sounds and/or music either on-screen or off-screen) and meta-diegetic (sounds and/or music that do not categorically fit in the precise diegetic spacetime of the film). Most of them are sounds and music deriving from the context of the film's environment, therefore forming a more realistic audio presentation of the scenes and leading us to think that the camera is breaking into the musicians' everyday lives. This diegetic aural framework is strongly connected with the cinematic, ideological and aesthetic viewpoint of «depicting things exactly as they are» (Wenders, 1991: 5), where no extra-diegetic sounds and/or music are used at all. Every audible part of these documentaries

is produced from inside their cinematic universes. However, meta-diegetic sonic elements are also present in the two films in the form of either music originating from the recorded album tracks of the groups or sounds emanating from previous or next scenes that create acoustic bridges between the films' sections or specific audiovisual effects that blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality. The two documentaries constantly alternate diegetic and meta-diegetic sounds and music, thus constructing complex sonic worlds that give an overall sense of fictional films. Obviously, this perspective has contributed significantly to their popularity.



Image 2. *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Café de los Maestros* film posters (<https://www.imdb.com/>).

There are quite a few characteristic examples of diegetic and meta-diegetic sounds and music coexistence in these two documentaries. For instance, in *Buena Vista Social Club*, there is a distinctive scene that emphasizes this mixture: it is actually the music video of the song «Cienfuegos Tiene su Guaguancó», in which the diegetic music during the studio recording is immediately transformed into a meta-diegetic sound of everyday life in Cuba (city noises, voices,

etc.), accompanying exterior shots in combination with other diegetic on-screen sounds. In *Café de los Maestros*, the introduction of the documentary is based on film footage from rehearsals, recordings and interviews inserted between shots of Santaolalla's arrival in Buenos Aires. Along with all the above, the director blends together natural and musical sounds to create intermingled diegetic and meta-diegetic sonic landscapes.

### 3. ETHNOMUSICOLOGY, GLOBAL MARKETS AND THE «WORLD MUSIC» LABEL

Within the framework of ethnomusicology and contemporary music industry, the term «world music» refers to music from geographical areas outside Europe and North America and includes traditional, popular and art music genres, as well as fusions of Western pop with local genres from all around the world (Weiss, 2014: 509). It was originally a scientific term adopted by academics around the early 1960s, which was related to musical diversity as opposed to the dominance of Western art music in academic and educational contexts (Feld, 2000: 146-147). After that time, along the 1960s and 1970s, there was a special interest from scholars but also from the market for music pluralism. During the 1980s, this was generally identified with the commercial exploitation of the world's music cultures. It was that period when the term was officially adopted by the music business as a profitable trading label for global promotional campaigns, advertisements, sales, concerts, music guides and reviews (Barrett, 1996: 239).

«World music» is an ambiguous term coined mainly by the record companies in order to promote the new-fangled category of mass-mediated, eclectic fusions of traditional ethnic and modern popular music (Brennan, 2001: 45). This label highlights local music genres, styles, songs, and melodies that have been discarded from their original context and have been used as artistic commodities inside the sphere of the commercial music market. As a musical category, world music has been mainly identified with genres described as «roots music» or «folk music». For modern audiences, world music was associated with traditional practices of music creation, which were considered to be more primitive and unmediated in relation to those of Western music (Pacini Hernández, 1998: 111). Various concepts (such as diversity, exoticism and nationalism) influenced the perception of this category, often playing a more substantial role than the music itself.

Another very important issue has been the relationship of world music with authenticity, which is based on a view of performance as being more faithful and accurate. World music genres awaken «deep feelings for Others and their cultures», while the public turns to them in search of the opposites of what Western societies offer: the old as opposed to the new, the timeless as opposed

to the ephemeral, the original as opposed to the artificial, the pure as opposed to the corrupted (Kavoori, 2018: 3-4). People have always conceived authenticity as a prerequisite for meaningful tourist experience (MacCannell, 1973: 593-595). In economic terms, world music is defined as a global market commodity of the popular music industry and a product of exchange within the cultural economy of world capitalism. Being now inside the spheres of supply and demand of the popular music industry, it fits within the logic of record companies' profits. Furthermore, it could be interpreted as a form of musical tourism, because it provides Western consumers with the impression of authenticity and the essential illusion of being involved in a foreign music culture, although moved away from its sociopolitical context (Roberts, 1992: 232-233).

#### 4. «WORLD MUSIC» DOCUMENTARIES, NOSTALGIA AND AUTHENTICITY

The films *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Café de los Maestros* have lots in common. First of all, they are both well-known music documentaries that present two non-European music cultures (the Cuban and the Argentine) by filming the recording and performing processes in which elderly artists participate. Directors choose to bring to light earlier music genres by approaching them through the lives and stories of distinguished musicians of the past who revive their long-standing traditions in the present. There are, therefore, similarities in the main characters of the two films, as well as in handling the overall projects, while both documentaries follow very closely all the performance processes in rehearsals, recordings and open concerts of the groups.

In addition, these films refer to musical traditions directly related to the «world music» category. One could actually describe them as «world music» documentaries. In the first case, it is the Cuban *son* that was «discovered» by small independent record companies in the 1990's (Hernandez-Reguant, 2012: 112). In the second instance, the focus is put on the Argentine *tango* –a genre influenced by Western ballroom dance, which came back to Europe, specifically to Paris (Link & Wendland, 2016: 8), passed rapidly to the phase of commercialization, spread quickly around the world and integrated into «world music» long before the term was even conceived (Tornqvist, 2013: 3). So, both films deal with universal music genres that are successfully sold worldwide as cultural products of market economy.

These two documentaries shape commercial representations of people, cultures and places, which meet the needs of the music and tourism sectors. Through visual and aural representations, they reproduce «cultures of the world» (Guibault, 1997) to reflect similar constructions within the cultural industry. In *Buena Vista Social Club*, this is quite evident in Ry Cooders' walk in Havana as a symbolic characteristic



of tourist videography, containing rapidly changing shots and images of the city (Kent, 2019: 160) –the woman with the cigar, the factory, the seafront of Malecon, children playing in the streets, etc. Furthermore, in *Café de los Maestros*, we see shots of Carlos Gardel’s poster, street dancers, football matches and a couple kissing. These are images of photographs and postcards, reproducing tourist stereotypes of the West for Cuba and Argentina, respectively. Thus, the portrayal of these two cultures could be, in fact, likened to a spectacle as not directly connected to the real world. The nostalgic approach and exoticization of music and culture serve precisely this tourist-based projection, regardless of actual social experience (Skinner, 2018).

A sense of nostalgia is present in both films. In *Buena Vista Social Club*, Wenders chooses to film on digital video to establish a raw and rugged aesthetic with reference to the cover of the album and create a nostalgic feeling for the «Old Cuba» (Kent, 2019: 156). Wenders himself has stated: «Basically these were the only decisions that I had taken for the film: not to shoot on film, but to use a digital camera instead, and not to put the camera on a tripod, but to have it move around constantly, fluidly» (Wenders & Wenders, 2000: 12). This perspective could be compared to the filmic approach in *Café de los Maestros*, specifically in its opening titles, where blurred and faded images are combined with Steadicam shots and the «Al Maestro con Nostalgia» song to produce a sentimental affection with the «old world» of *tango* in Buenos Aires. In addition to the quality of images, nostalgia is created by blurring the boundaries of historical time and place and applying ambiguous «back and forth» or «here and there» techniques, as temporal and spatial contexts converge within the film (Kent, 2019: 158-159) –see, for example, all the scenes that contain diverse shots of modern/colored and black-and-white photos or videos. These nostalgic approaches are features of folklorization due to the decontextualization of cultural representations (Godreau, 2002: 282). Through their specific cinematic strategies, both documentaries construct images of music and the city cut off from their actual social, economic and political realities. Wenders’ film neither does it mention the «Periodo Especial en Tiempo de Paz»– an extended era of economic crisis in Cuba that began in 1991 mainly due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Kent, 2019: 154), although it was shot four years later, nor the United States embargo. Hernández (2002: 61) describes this type of nostalgia as «ahistorical». Respectively, nowhere in Kohan’s film are there any references to Argentina’s financial crisis and the 2001 riots nor to the role of *tango* in these events. The relations between music and place appear unchanged; however, they have been idealized, resulting in romanticized versions of social and cultural reality.

The concept of «authenticity» also plays an essential role in the documentaries’ perspective. The production of a so-called «authentic» sound had been the main challenge of the two music albums. Both were recorded in old studios that were initially associated with many of the films’ musicians, in an attempt to make the

soundtrack look like an album of the past (Fairley, 2009: 11). For example, the recording process of *Buena Vista Social Club* was described as «archaic, pre-technological, a kind of acoustic authenticity... [a] nostalgic filter—a kind of pre-modern [...] art emphatically opposed to today's music» (Fairley, 2009: 13). Accordingly, the musicians of *Café de los Maestros* were supposed to «represent *tango* in its original voice» (Holston, 2009: 48). The two documentaries approach two music cultures by trying to draw attention to «legitimate» representations. This becomes obvious through the selection of the main characters and shooting locations of the films. By demonstrating an exoticized and romantic view of various cities and their inhabitants, the films construct a symbolic interpretation of these cultures shaped through «otherness» and nostalgia. The musical genres are transformed into the «soundtracks» of these places, as images of cityscapes are constantly «moving in the rhythms» of *son* and *tango*. This is achieved by a kind of music video clips, which have been embedded in the films, such as the recordings of «Cienfuegos» and «A mis Viejos» songs. Interviews of older musicians, usually presented in the form of «voice-over», also contribute to the shaping of their cultural identities. Voice-over narration of stories about the artists' lives and careers combined with filmic reflections of places lead to the creation of a vigorous audiovisual context that enhances the notion of cultural fidelity (Oberacker, 2008: 58-59).

The authenticity of cultural commodities is a very important concept for the mechanism of «racialization», which is necessary for non-European and non-American products to be accepted by the Western white audiences in the world music market (Pacini Hernández, 1998: 113). Labeling specific music genres as authentic by highlighting elements of their racial identity is essentially a biased operation that categorizes non-Western musicians intending to commercialize and ultimately position them as a minority in relation to the Western groups (Haynes, 2005). This is a practice that applies not only to the world music business but also to the world cinema industry, as images created by film directors that aim to attract viewers through an orientalist perspective of audiovisual representations of the non-Western cultures. It is a comparable conceptualization of two «world» cultural productions, namely music and film, as artefacts and practices that can be simply, and rather contentedly, identified as the «Non-Western Other» to the «Western Self» (Dennison & Lim, 2006: 1-4).

On the one hand, *Buena Vista Social Club* tries to approach music identities through the gaze of the Western travelers, namely the director and the producer, who—as commercial and artistic intermediaries—would like to export Cuban music abroad (Hernandez-Reguant, 2012: 112-113). The film ends with a celebratory concert at the Carnegie Hall in New York, where Cuban musicians seem very delighted to perform in the USA, although travel between the two countries was restricted due to political tension. Being an American producer and the one who—theoretically

and practically– organized this revival, Ry Cooder was in the center of the film’s backstage, ultimately representing a cultural authority that defined the artistic result. This remark is also reinforced by considering the use of Cooder’s voice overs, which give the impression of being controlled by their bearer and manipulating the musicians’ performances as an assertive colonial discourse (Oberacker, 2008: 59-60). It is worth noting that Cooder’s intention was to create a unified impression of this musical revival, although «[v]ery few of the musicians in the film had performed either in the Buena Vista or in other of Havana’s social clubs. Indeed, [...] the elders of *Buena Vista Social Club* have their roots elsewhere in the island, [...] many miles and several cultural worlds from Havana» (Wyndham & Read, 2003: 500).

On the other hand, *Café de los Maestros* «utilizes tango’s tendency to work with and through nostalgia» (Wheeler, 2017: 212). In *Café de los Maestros*, Santaolalla –although Argentine– gains prestige due to his status as a successful producer and Oscar-awarded film composer who works in the USA, fully compromised with the Western lifestyle. The film’s folkloric approach of music as an exotic element of authenticity forms a narrative that responds to the commercial stereotypes and the needs of the world market. Western supremacy is also expressed during the concert at the Colón Theater. The opera house acquires symbolic power and, like Carnegie Hall in *Buena Vista Social Club*, is transformed into a dominating place. This becomes audibly apparent through the contrast between the unrefined sounds of the rehearsals and the approximately 20 minutes of continuous recital music, which is distinguished as a more majestic and prestigious performance than the practice sessions. These two concerts of the Cuban and the Argentine groups are presented during the final scene of each one of the two documentaries, which attaches them particular importance for the construction of the films’ general meaning by capturing audiences’ attention via a triumphant musical finale (Image 3).

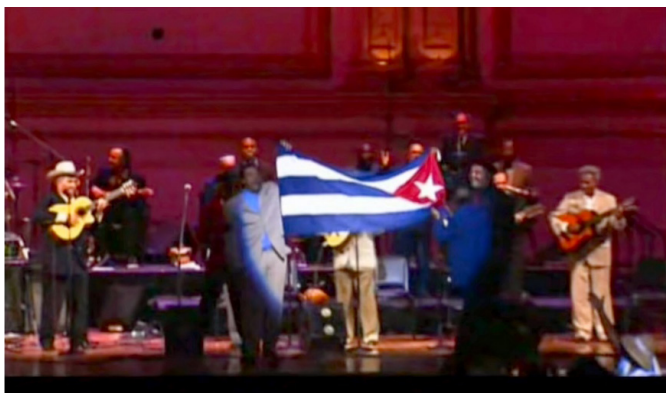




Image 3. *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Café de los Maestros* final scenes' concerts (films' stills).

## 5. CONCLUSION: MUSIC, FILM AND GLOBALIZATION

If *Buena Vista Social Club* is a call of Cubans to the world, *Café de los Maestros* is a call of Argentines to their country. *Buena Vista Social Club* tries to approach local music practices as well as the musician's identity through the perspective of the Western travelers (the director and the producer), who as both artistic and commercial intermediaries aspire to export high-quality musical products of Cuba abroad. As Wim Wenders is not familiar with this culture, his camera explores the place and resorts to stereotypical images, symbols of exoticism and decadence for the foreign voyagers but not for the Cuban people. Thus, the perspective of the construction of this musical identity is external and superficial. On the other hand, *Café de los Maestros* was filmed and produced by Argentine artists, as if the story was created from the inside –an attempt to inspect the musical revival of *tango* and create an artwork for the Argentines and not for the Westerners. That is why the camera does not wander around; there is nothing unknown to look for. Yet, even this inner methodology is illusionary, as both Miguel Kohan and Gustavo Santaolalla are not straightforwardly connected with *tango* as an earlier cultural practice, but only as a modern musical hybrid (Miller, 2014: 23).

To sum up, both documentaries (*Buena Vista Social Club* and *Café de los Maestros*) strive to present –to a greater or lesser degree– stories about non-Western music, just like the West imagines them and not always giving priority to the bearers of the cultures shown on screen. Besides that, an extensive discussion is needed on the overall concept of «world cinema», supposedly outlined as the set of films made outside of the USA motion picture industry, away from its commercial

aesthetics and values, which still is a negative and hegemonic definition as it defines what world cinema is not, rather than what it really is (Mazierska, 2020: 17). Eventually, the abovementioned films reveal a rigorously guided, fixed and preconstructed idea about what the terms «world music» and «world cinema» mean to the Western audiences and how they perceive them. But, does the same apply to the people of the cultures in question? Although *Buena Vista Social Club* did not have special general resonance in Cuba, *Café de los Maestros* enjoyed a great level of acceptance by the Argentine public. As a matter of fact, this could be a confirmation of the power of globalization: when music cultures adapt to the markets' needs, the ways by which they are represented and comprehended change. This is the time when new perspectives and identities are formed, emerging from novel conditions that redefine previous worldviews.

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