

Groupe Deux, KGP Filmproduktion, Little Magnet Films
present

EPICENTRO

by Hubert Sauper

109 minutes | Austria, France | 2020

World Premiere - 2020 Sundance Film Festival

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LOGLINE

The latest documentary from Oscar®-nominated director Hubert Sauper is an immersive portrait of “utopian” Cuba and its resilient people a century after the explosion of the USS Maine in Havana, the event that ushered in the American Empire alongside a modern form of world conquest: cinema itself.

SYNOPSIS

From world-renowned filmmaker Hubert Sauper — director of Sundance winner WE COME AS FRIENDS and the Oscar®-nominated DARWIN’S NIGHTMARE — comes EPICENTRO, an immersive and metaphorical portrait of post-colonial, “utopian” Cuba, where the 1898 explosion of the USS Maine still resonates. This Big Bang ended Spanish colonial dominance in the Americas and ushered in the era of the American Empire. At the same time and place, a powerful tool of conquest was born: cinema as propaganda. In EPICENTRO, Sauper explores a century of interventionism and myth-making together with the extraordinary people of Havana — particularly its children, who he calls “young prophets” — to interrogate time, imperialism and cinema itself.

HUBERT SAUPER

Hubert Sauper was born in Kitzbühel in the Tyrolian Alps and for the past two decades has been based in France after living in Great Britain, Italy, United States, Tanzania, Congo, and South Sudan. Sauper is known for his socio-political documentary films which have garnered over fifty major international prizes including at Berlin, Venice, Sundance, the European Film Academy Award, the Austrian Academy Award, as well as the French "Cesar." He received an Academy Award® nomination for DARWIN'S NIGHTMARE (2004), a documentary spotlighting the environmental impact of the fishing industry in the fragile Tanzanian ecosystem, and was last at Sundance with WE COME AS FRIENDS (2014), which focuses on the war conflict among the Sudanese and was awarded a Special Jury Award at the festival.

Sauper has worked as a visiting professor at many film schools and universities around the world, among them Harvard, Yale, UCLA, Columbia University, Colorado University, Universidad de Caracas, Universidad de la Havana, FEMIS (French film school), Moscow International Film School, Istanbul University, Southern Mediterranean Cinema School, the African international film school in Marrakech (ESAV), the Austrian Film Academy, and the International Film School (EICTV) in Havana, Cuba. He is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the European Film Academy, and Academie Francaise du Cinema.

INTERVIEW WITH HUBERT SAUPER

Would you say that EPICENTRO is consistent with your previous work, both stylistically and in your narrative impulse? What are the recurring themes?

As a filmmaker, I simply translate the world as I am able to see it — and how it moves me — into “images that move.” I try to challenge mainstream thinking. I challenge the arrogant narrative of power with cinema. It is in a way easy for me to do this, being privileged to work over long periods of time in situations and places where few people wind up in “normal life circumstances.” In all my films the “little humans” that we call children are big stars. I see them as little prophets, truth tellers – that’s what they are. Watching a young person explain the world is often deeper and more honest, even smarter, even more illuminating experience than watching academics or politicians with bookshelves in the background. We the audience of a film, “are” the child we watch. We are reminded of the truth speaker we all were, and can be. We look at and listen to a child, even from a different continent or class, and we look profoundly at ourselves.

This is a film that directly engages with American history and ideology as well. Is that a large part of what drew you to making the film? Can you speak a little about your own relationship to America?

I was a child in the late '60s in the Austrian Alps, and the spirits of the Third Reich were still palpable in those narrow valleys. At least half of all the adults around me had lived and served in Nazi Germany. Even though nobody saluted Hitler anymore, the demons were alive. At the age of 18, I left as a “political refugee,” running for my life, away from what caused me too much anguish. It is ironic that this breathtaking, beautiful land of mountains and glaciers, lakes and forests was Europe’s “heart of darkness”. At least this is how I perceived it. My parents ran a beautiful little mountain inn, and they spoke many languages. One day, my dad befriended a high-ranking general of the U.S. Air Force, one of the commanders at Frankfurt Rhein Main airbase. This base in Germany was one of the most important hubs between America and Vietnam when the shit hit the fan. The general would send delegations of USAF personnel and bomber pilots (after they had thrown napalm and agent orange on people in Vietnam) to the Austrian Alps to relax among mountain people. As a child my “new normal” was living in my parents’ family hotel with “crazy Americans” in a village stuck in time with old Nazis everywhere. The collision of worlds could hardly have been more drastic. My dad always reminded me that “what you see is not always what you think it is.” When you see a village in the sun with flowers on every balcony and people singing Tyrolean songs, it is hard to think of the omnipresent abyss. So in a weird way, I “grew up in America.” Later, in my twenties, I lived and worked in Colorado and California. Europeans and Americans are much more similar than they would like to think, at their best and their worst.

Domination and the colonial mindset are always under scrutiny in your films. They offer windows into history. How does EPICENTRO reflect on our current world politics, and more specifically, American geo-politics?

EPICENTRO is Cuba. This beautiful island is the epicenter of the Americas, in many ways. Geographically, it's in the very center between north and south. Politically, it's at the crossroads of capitalism and communism. Historically, it's been the epicenter of Spanish America as well as the nucleus of US-American expansionism. The first U.S. flag to be raised overseas was in February 1898 on a hill overlooking Guantánamo Bay. To me this explains why Guantánamo will never be given back to Cuba. It's symbolically too important for the empire. Havana itself is a living indictment of American history, a window into time. It is not surprising that Americans are so charmed and hypnotized by the beauty of Havana [with] its billboards from the 1950s and the amazing American architecture and old cars, which have been on the road 80-plus years. Some people dream about "making Cuba great again." A famous American real estate tycoon has long planned a tower with his name on it. It's the "T-word"... I don't want to spell it. When you think that most of the hotel towers on the Malecon sea promenade were made by the Mafia kings in the 50's, when you think that their « religion » was abuse of power, luxury, gambling, prostitution ... history seems like dirty running gag.

Putting the role of film and media in a contemporary social-political context, can you talk a bit about the history of movie images as political tool, as propaganda — at least as it relates to the film?

Moving images don't reflect history today, they ARE history. What counts is not "what happened in history", but how it is remembered on film. Cinema is much more than memory: it is prophecy. A small example I tried to highlight in EPICENTRO: George Méliès' 1902 "science fiction" film A TRIP TO THE MOON. The rocket into space, scientists stepping on the moon as they see the earth rise, the return by parachute into the ocean, a big parade in the city to celebrate the space travelers. All this was envisioned by Jules Verne and Méliès, and NASA turned the prophecy into the real thing sixty-six years later. Cinema is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Moving images "program" our minds, and our future, so that should make us think twice about what we put on screens. Industrial cinema made in Hollywood and other places is such an overwhelming business; the opportunity overrides most reflections of this sort. The brainless machine we create comes back to haunt us. Mass shootings during a mass shooting movie and the poor jerk with a machine gun shouting, "This is for real!" I don't know what to say any more. This is "real dystopia."

As a European filmmaker shooting in places like Cuba and Africa, how do you see your own role or responsibility as an image-maker in light of this?

Well, of course I am a person from the continent that overthrew most of the planet's ancient cultures and religions by colonizing lands, uprooting belief systems, and carrying out genocide. And this bloody conquest has never ended, contrary to what we would prefer to tell ourselves. WE COME AS FRIENDS, my movie before EPICENTRO, depicts this global problem. When it comes to my way of filming, I try to see the world through a reduced prism, a micro universe: I

am a human who “looks in the eyes” of another humans, meaning I look “at ourselves” – regardless of origin and color of skin. The common denominator between a tribesman in the Sudan and some pale guy with a camera like myself seems slight. But when this person looks into my eyes, tells her or his story and we connect, then the tiny camera between us is simply a device to witness this link, not our difference. The audience of a film can feel this, without any doubt. My very first film in Africa was given a “label” by one of the fathers of the Nouvelle Vague, Jean Rouch. He called KISANGANI DIARY the dawn of a new form of cinema: “cinema du lien” – the cinema of contact.”

Each of the films you have made possesses its own strong character and is created with your deeply personal and authentic vision: the result is truly original works of non-fiction that nonetheless feel very close to “dystopian fiction”.

I wish dystopia was fiction. Of the spectrum of all co- existing realities we see a small part. We see what we can, what we want to see, and what is shown to us. As a nonfiction filmmaker, my task is not to “show reality as it is.” That makes no sense, it does not exist. I create a world – a movie – which consists of real people in their real environment, as themselves. They offer us their landscape of thoughts and dreams – or nightmares. In EPICENTRO, though, I tried to reflect on these amazing and opposing terms, “utopia” and “dystopia” and thus by focusing on Cuban society as a case study. The book *Utopia*, written by Thomas More, appeared in the wake of Columbus’ “discovery” of America. I think it is amazing that the otherworld utopia – meaning a good place and a nonexistent place at once – emerged at the same moment as the “new world.” Although I did not want to spell out this thought in the film, the utopian idea of the American dream can also turn into its dystopian opposite. This is the case in the margins of the empire. But the art of cinema can do magic, it can transform factual knowledge into something superior: experience!

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MORE WONDERFUL PEOPLE, AS THEMSELVES

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