



New cover by Jon Contino <https://www.criterion.com/films/28792-buena-vista-social-club> 1999 1 hour 46 minutes TV-G

Film Guide: Buena Vista Social Club

“Traveling from the streets of Havana to the stage of Carnegie Hall, this revelatory documentary captures a forgotten generation of Cuba’s brightest musical talents as they enjoy an unexpected encounter with world fame. The veteran vocalists and instrumentalists collaborated with American guitarist and roots-music champion Ry Cooder to form the Buena Vista Social Club, playing a jazz-inflected mix of cha-cha, mambo, bolero, and other traditional Latin American styles, and recording an album that won a Grammy and made them an international phenomenon. In the wake of this success, director Wim Wenders filmed the ensemble’s members—including golden-voiced Ibrahim Ferrer and piano virtuoso Rubén González—in a series of illuminating interviews and live performances. The result is one of the most beloved documentaries of the 1990s, and an infectious ode to a neglected corner of Cuba’s prerevolutionary heritage.” <https://www.criterion.com/films/28792-buena-vista-social-club>

General guidelines for using film in the classroom

Film can be used in a way similar to diverse literature, transporting students to a different place or time. To show a good film is to give students the opportunity to experience a piece of life through someone else’s eyes. If we use films written, directed, produced, or acted by those from other countries, we’re also providing exposure to another point of view, one that is often vastly different from our own.

Our students are from a visually and technologically savvy generation. Amid Promethean boards, other smart board technologies, iPad, and iMovie apps, watching a movie in class isn’t necessarily the ‘treat’ it used to be—some of our students are used to creating their own movies. Too often movies in class have become synonymous with naptime or busy work—a.k.a. the teacher has work they have to get done and doesn’t have time to teach. So, the idea of a movie itself might not catch a class’s attention, but that story that transports them to a country they have never seen, an ecosystem they’ve only read about, languages or music they’ve never heard of, or art they’ve never seen—that can grab their attention.

Discussions of films like these are always a great exercise in critical thinking skills. In the Spring of 2012, the LAII hosted a workshop on “Teaching About the Border Through the Lens of Film.” Dr. Liz Hutchison, UNM professor of History, brought up several important points to consider when using film in the classroom—many that could lead to fruitful discussions.

The following is a section from a handout she provided. It’s full of great questions, both for teachers to consider when choosing films, and to be used in class discussions about films. She specifies Latin America, as that is our focus, but these are applicable to any film.

Film as a source for teaching about Latin America

- **Origins:** Why, when, and how was this film produced? Who paid for production and dissemination? Who was supposed to see it?
- **Motives:** What was the film maker trying to accomplish by writing/directing/producing this film? What were the film-maker’s immediate goals (to persuade its audience, to document events, to effect political or other change, etc.)?
- **Perspective:** What can you tell about the film-maker’s values and assumptions by watching the film itself? What can you learn about his/her biography, historical context, or career from other sources? How does this affect the credibility or reliability of the film with respect to the events it portrays?
- **Film:** What major themes and topics emerge in the film itself? If the film claims to be “true,” what evidence or techniques does the filmmaker use to convey the story or message of the film, and are these assertions believable?
- **Information:** What does the film say about the events, people, or time period under discussion?

Learning Objectives This resource incorporates activities aligned to the following [Common Core Standards](#):

Reading Standards for Information Texts grades 11-12:

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain. 7. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Writing Standards grades 11-12:

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. a. Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence. b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases. c. Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims. d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented. 4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. 8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation. 9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. a. Apply grades 11–12 Reading standards to literature (e.g., “Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics”). b. Apply grades 11–12 Reading standards to literary nonfiction (e.g., “Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning [e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court Case majority opinions and dissents] and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy [e.g., The Federalist, presidential addresses]”).

Speaking and Listening Standards grades 11-12:

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas. b. Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed. c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives. d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task. 2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data. 4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

Resources for using films in the classroom

We realize films these can be hard to come by, so below we have provided information about programs that provide many Latin American films for free to teachers nationwide.

The [Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies](#) has an incredible [Lending Library](#). It is “the most comprehensive lending collection of educational materials about Latin American topics available for classroom use. The library holds over 3,000 videos, slide packets, culture kits, curriculum units, games, and miscellaneous print items.” Films comprise a large part of their resources and they will ship the films to teachers nationwide.

The [Institute for the Study of the Americas](#) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has extensive [Film Resources](#) that they too, freely lend to educators nationally. They also have a section devoted to k-12 classrooms with accompanying curricular materials for the majority of the films.

Cultural Context:

- **Afro-Cuban Music:** [Cuba: Son and Afro-Cuban Music](#), [Cuban Music History](#), [UN Video: The African Roots of Cuban Music](#)
- **Afro-latinidad in Cuba:** [AFRO CUBA LIBRE: A Mini-Documentary on Race in Cuba](#), [Black in Latin America E01 Cuba: The Next Revolution](#), [Three Generations of Cuban Women Speak Out](#), [For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun](#)

Ideas for engaging students with the material:

- Break students up into **small groups** where they are assigned one or two (depending on length) video clips or articles to read. Students then work in their groups to prepare short presentations for the class where they teach their content.
- Students can work **individually/at home** and pick for themselves 2 pieces from each category to then write about and turn in as homework.
- Students can decide as a class on 1-2 items from each category to watch/read and then have a **whole class** discussion on the topics.

Political Context:

- **The Cuban Revolution:** [The Cuban Revolution Explained: World History View YouTube video](#)
- **Communism:** [Communism Explained Video](#), [Communism Explained Website](#)
- **The Special Period:** [The Special Period Explained](#)

Ideas for engaging students with the material:

- Break students up into three **groups** and assign each group one topic. They will then read/watch the material and prepare presentations together that they will share with the class where they will essentially teach the subject they were assigned.
- Students can work **individually/at home** and go through all the content and come to class ready to share and participate in discussion. Or educators can assign students one topic that they can then be prepared to share about in class.
- There is room for **whole class** activities such as debates especially on the topic of communism. After watching the videos and reading the website break the class into 2 groups who will weigh the pros and cons of a communist society and then debate with the opposing group.

Dialogue Journals: Preparing to Watch the Film

Give each student a copy of the instructions for the dialogue journal. As a class, read over the various guiding ideas listed on the sheet, discussing what they mean, and possible examples. Have each student create a table out of paper with two columns labeled "Observations/Quotes" and "Reactions and Reflections." View the film over a few days. Have students use the table they created to keep a dialogue journal throughout the viewing of the film. Students can keep track of their thoughts as they watch the film, then give them time at the end of each class period to expand on their "Reactions and Reflections" section. If time allows, expand the activity by having students write a more in-depth review of the movie or reflection on the themes based upon the things they noted in their dialogue journal. Students should include why or why not they would recommend the movie, its usefulness in the classroom, and what their reaction to the film was.

Instructions for Dialogue Journal

The following is adapted from Linda Christensen's book *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* (2000, p. 48-49)

Dialogue Journal for Film: Guiding Ideas

As you watch the film, keep track of scenes or dialogues that you want the class to come to for discussion, or that you want to think more about. Use your observations and reflections table to list the specific scene or dialogue, and to write your reaction. The following are ideas to help you think about what you are viewing.

1. **SOCIAL QUESTIONS:** Looks for race, class, and gender inequalities. Write about what you notice and how it makes you feel, or why you think it's important.
2. **QUESTIONS:** It could be that you don't understand something that is happening in the documentary. These questions usually lead to classroom discussions.
3. **MEMORIES:** Every dialogue or scene changes somewhat depending upon the viewer and his or her experiences. You might hear yourself saying, "That reminds me of..." What memories click when you watch the film?
4. **AHA'S:** As you watch a movie/documentary you might start to notice a thread that you want to follow. Keep track of these. When it comes time to write an essay or an extended response questions, you will have the evidence that you need.
5. **OTHER READINGS OR FILMS:** Sometimes when we watch a film, other films or books come to mind. It's good to write those down.
6. **VISUAL TECHNIQUES:** Keep track of great visual techniques: use of imagery, flashback, scenery, filming style, etc. Notice the things that work and how they help to further the purpose of the film.

ACTIVITY SHEET FOR DIALOGUE JOURNAL

NAME _____ DATE _____

OBSERVATIONS/QUOTES	REACTIONS & REFLECTIONS

Watch: *Buena Vista Social Club*

Available at the UNM University Libraries, in the section Resources for Using Films in the Classroom above, and for rent/purchase online.

Comprehension Questions:

1. In the opening scene where the photographer is sharing his photos, who is Che and who is Fidel based on what you already know about Cuba?
2. What does it mean that everyone Segundo asked knew where the Social Club was?
3. Who played at the Social Club and when did it shut down?
4. What instruments do you see the in the band when they play in Amsterdam? Name 5.
5. When Ry Cooder and his son Joachim are riding in the motorcycle with the side car and the camera is panning on the city, what do you notice about the buildings and the other cars shown in the film?
6. What does Omara Portuondo's emotion after singing the duet with Ibrahim Ferrer tell you? Why do you think she was crying?
7. What did Ibrahim Ferrer share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
8. What did Omara Portuondo share about herself? Write down what you learned about her.
9. How long has she known the song "*Veinte Años*" and what award did it win?
10. What did Compay Segundo share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
11. What did Eliades Ochoa share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
12. Describe Ibrahim's home? Did it seem like the home of a famous musician who plays sold out shows around the world? Write down your thoughts.
13. Describe some of the important things and figures he shared with the film makers in his home.
14. How does he describe Cuba?
15. What did Ruben Gonzalez share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
16. What instrument does Ruben Gonzalez play?
17. What were some of the jobs that Ibrahim had?
18. How old is Segundo and how many children does he have?
19. Describe how Ibrahim got to EGREM studios? What was he doing just before?
20. What did Orlando Lopez share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
21. What did Almadito Valdez share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
22. What did Manuel Mirabal share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
23. What did "Barbarito" Torres share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
24. What did Pio Leyva share about himself? Write down what you learned about him.
25. How does Joachim Cooder describe learning percussion from the Cuban musicians?
26. How did it all get started according to Ry Cooder?
27. Why was it hard to find so many of the Cuban musicians?
28. Where did they get everyone together for a concert for the first time?
29. Where did all the musicians want to play? In what city?
30. What was significant about the show in New York?
31. Think back question 5, compare how the buildings and streets looked in Cuba compared to New York City. What differences can you notice?
32. What did Ibrahim say about New York City?
33. Why did Ibrahim want to sing anymore?
34. How long and since when has Ibrahim had his staff?
35. What did the musicians hold up at the end of the concert at Carnegie Hall?

Reflective Writing post watch Q's:

- 1. Think about what you have learned about the political context and history of Cuba before watching the documentary and think about what you notice about Cuba in the opening scenes. What condition are the buildings in? What do the cars look like? How does this relate to Cuba's position in the 1990's?**
- 2. Looking back to each of the musician's experiences and life stories, did you find any common threads that ran through each of their histories? Describe some of the commonalities you noticed.**
- 3. How is Buena Vista Social Club a unique group? Describe how the group was formed.**
- 4. Did the documentary display the influence of Afro-music in Cuba? Do you think that African culture is an obvious influence for Buena Vista Social Club and other popular music in Cuba?**
- 5. Think back to the short video clips about race in Cuba. Does the documentary address race at all? In your opinion, why or why not? What clips can you connect this concept back to?**
- 6. How do you think participating in making the album and getting the opportunity to play to sold out shows in Amsterdam and New York changed the lives of the musicians involved?**