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THE LAST SACRED IMAGE OF THE LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTION

'In certain rare cases, the tragedy of a man's death completes and exemplifies the meaning of his entire life.'

(John Berger, 1967/1968)

'Che's brutally eloquent ending was like a flash of lightning that suddenly illuminated his whole admirable trajectory.'

(John William Cooke, 1967/1968)

Some of the most widely circulated political images of recent years are those of Ernesto Che Guevara. And much has been said about the constantly renovated significance that those images acquired over the time and spaces within which they were disseminated. With regard to the iconic photographs, comment has focused on the enormous gulf between the political and cultural topography of the epoch in which they were captured and that of the subsequent periods in which they were (and are) deployed or received. Similarly, criticism has concentrated on the ideological emptying of the Guevara epic as a result of contemporary consumption of the posters, T-shirts, cups, stamps and postcards that have proliferated as part of the culture industry's uses and abuses of Che Guevara's image.¹

Although a multitude of these images spread to many parts of the world, there were two which, for fundamentally different if not openly opposed reasons and political motives, were particularly widely distributed in the years immediately after Che's death. One is Alberto (Díaz Gutiérrez) Korda's famous photograph of Guevara wearing a beret with a five-pointed star and staring fixedly into the distance; the other, the photograph of Guevara's corpse lying in a stretcher atop a large concrete sink in the laundry room at Vallegrande Hospital, to where it was taken after his execution in La Higuera. There are many versions of the latter photograph, but the most well-known is Bolivian press photographer Freddy Alborta's shot, in which Guevara's body is surrounded by Bolivian soldiers and other journalists (figure 1).

Whereas the first was embraced by an entire generation as a symbol of the rebellious spirit of Revolution, appeared on the flags and banners of anti-establishment movements and was incorporated within the collective visual memory of political struggle from the 1960s onwards, the second (in its various versions), although not so durable, was equally as significant in that it was instantly transmitted as a radiophoto and hit the front pages of the world's press immediately after Che's demise; indeed, its intention was to prove that Guevara had been captured and killed.



FIGURE 1 Photograph by Freddy Alborta, 1967.

Two documentaries made some time after what could be called the ‘Che epoch’ (or the extended sixties) utilized these photographs. Although stylistically different, they share the merit of recording the testimonies of the photographers who took those iconic images.

In *Una foto recorre el mundo* (*A Photo Travels the World* – 1981), filmmaker Pedro Chaskel examines the photograph Korda took at a 5 March 1960 event in Havana to commemorate those killed when the boat ‘La Coubre’ was sabotaged. At the very beginning of the documentary, Korda tells of the moment in which he took the picture: as he scanned those present on the podium, Che’s face (in the second row) suddenly loomed large in the viewfinder, causing such a profound impression that Korda jumped backwards, as if in fright, pressing the shutter as he did so. This was the profound impact caused by an already legendary figure.

Similarly, when Freddy Alborta photographed the corpse in October 1967, Che was in many ways an already ‘mythical’ figure, says the photographer, known all around the world. In this case, the impact on the photographer is bound up with the context within which the picture was taken: at the public presentation of the body to the national and international press, in an event staged by the Bolivian authorities. And it is on this image that artist and filmmaker Leandro Katz focuses in *El día que me quieras* (*The Day You’ll Love Me* – 1997), fracturing it to thus comprehend its potency.

Through his research for the film, Katz rediscovers the authorship of an image that circulated for many years as news agency property but which, even having fulfilled its allotted function as a press shot within the mass media’s rules and regulations of organization and distribution, remains the work of one photographer, Alborta, who reclaims his role and reveals other photographs taken at Vallegrande. Katz’s camera

reconstructs the labour behind the iconic image: the quotidian ritual of the photojournalist revealing carefully preserved negatives, but no longer to sell them for \$75 dollars to an eager agency hoping to be the first to hit the headlines, but rather to explore the more obscure elements of that infamous event.

On the basis of the testimony of Alborta as a prime witness (the value of which is heightened further by his recent death), the film re-examines some of the least well-known and unexplained aspects of Che's final hours to which the photographic focus inexorably draws the eye. Because of their explicitness, many of these aspects had until then not formed the principal focus of any previous investigations, at least not visual studies.² Katz's exploration of the margins and minute details of this image unlocks the photographer's memories of that transcendental moments in his (and world) history: the glances exchanged between those present, Che's mysteriously covered left hand, the bodies of other guerrillas on the floor, the staging of the event for journalists, the photographer's perspective, the aesthetic resonance with great works of universal art.³

Umberto Eco⁴ included the photograph of Che's corpse amongst his selection of 'photos that made an age'; images transformed into myths and multivalent discursive metaphors; images that echo with other images, from both the past and the future; photos, paintings and posters that transcend their protagonists and subjects to express broader concepts, which function not as description, but as explanation; symbols engendering reality and moving fluidly between the politico-public and private spheres; a type of image which, 'at its very genesis, commences its communicative mission'.

In this analysis, the 'genesis' occurs in the moments following Che Guevara's death and in the final years of the 1960s, the period on which we will concentrate, seeing the significance of these images oscillate, in the case of Argentina, between the insurrectional impetus of revolution and the repressive logic of the security forces in Latin America.

I.

A few short hours after the capture and execution of Ernesto Guevara (8–9 October 1967), Vallegrande Hospital's laundry was transformed into an improvised third-world-style morgue. The next day reporters arrived to certify the death, fulfilling an essential function of press *photography*, with its truth effect and reality effect that, once converted into a press *photo*, inform about and verify the events.

This, as we already know, was the objective of the Bolivian government and the US agents; hence the swift conveyance by airplane of journalists, photographers and cameramen; hence the careful preparation of the corpse, the open eyes, the elevated head, the placing of a magazine shot of Che's face in life next to the dead body to facilitate an unequivocal comparison. These methods of public authentication fell short of the official identification that an event of such magnitude called for, but they nevertheless bore worldwide witness to Che's demise and thus, it was believed, signalled the end of insurrection in Latin America.

It is within this cramped cloister that Alborta moves with such care, looking for propitious angles and appropriate perspectives with which to frame a body that had made such a profound impression upon him. The gaze seemed almost alive and Alborta was overcome with the sense that he was looking at the body of a Christ-like figure.

We could argue that this figure, a Che referring to a Christ, does not emerge only from the composition of the film and photographic images taken at Vallegrande, such as Alborta's, but also, and fundamentally, from the referent itself, from the body's arrangement, its method of display, the preparation of both body and face; despite the fact that those interventions were designed with wholly different objectives in mind.

There are other images, taken just a few hours before the execution at La Higuera, in which Che appears standing, solemn, somewhere between crestfallen and furious, with dishevelled and dirty clothes and hair, part of his face obscured by a shadow that seems to extend his beard down his open shirt, being led with his hands cuffed before him. This is Che portrayed as a criminal or a bandit, not a political prisoner or a revolutionary. And then in the laundry at Vallegrande, next to his stretched body lying prone on the concrete sink, are the corpses of two other guerrillas who were captured alive and then murdered at La Higuera: Willy and 'el Chino'. Inevitably, their presence is barely registered, but in some photographs and films they can be seen dumped on the floor, one beside the other, with the same dust and dirt on their faces and tattered clothes as when they were captured.

In contrast, Che had been carefully prepared by his captors before being displayed to the press. His body had been washed, his hair combed, his beard had even been trimmed and, as we have already mentioned, his eyes were opened to aid identification. But in that moment an unexpected effect was observed: 'A total metamorphosis' says Castañeda: '[Che] was transformed into the Christ of Vallegrande, reflecting in his limpid open eyes the utter peace of a willing sacrifice. The Bolivian army committed the only error of its campaign after it had already secured the most prized war trophy; it transformed the trapped and vanquished revolutionary, the indigent of la Quebrada del Yuro, utterly beaten, wrapped in rags and with shadows of rage and defeat obscuring his face, into a Christ-like image of life after death. By taking his life, Che's executioners imprinted a body a face and a soul on the myth that would travel the world (...)'.⁵

Castañeda and other biographers have commented on the swift spread of the physical comparison with Jesus Christ by those local people who had come before the corpse. This primary testimony would accompany the photographic and film images on their journeys around the world.

The images of the corpses of Willy and 'el Chino' seem to offer testament to the victims of war, anonymous entities frozen in a moment in time without, in this case, the least semblance of bureaucratic order to guarantee individuality. In contrast, the image of Che's body, although fulfilling the testimonial function we have already mentioned, also assumes an important evocative power.

II.

In later years a number of authors recovered the resonance, initially proposed by John Berger immediately after the execution, between the radiophoto of Che's corpse (figure 1) and Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp* and Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*⁶ (figures 2 and 4).

Martine Joly,⁷ for example, placed it alongside other examples of the deployment of allegory within press photography. In this case, the fundamental iconographic



FIGURE 2 Rembrandt. *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*.

contradiction between the paintings cited leads to a more complex reading of the contemporary image: 'Between sacrifice and dissection, the analysis of Che's death is made more sophisticated by photographic allegory'.

Rocco Mangieri⁸ proposes the interaction in the image of three fundamental themes (the mystical-Christian body, the medical-anatomical body, and the body and hunting), which elucidate three meanings: the fallen body of martyrdom, the pious body; the functional body of rational science, the body exposed to autopsy; and the hunted body or trophy. Similarly, Mangieri relates the Bolivian official's signalling of the body in the photo with three types of gaze, corresponding to the themes and meanings cited (the gaze of pity and pain, the analytical gaze and the possessive gaze), which he claims are deployed by many great painters of Western art.

Susan Sontag⁹ also comments on the accidental resemblance between these two paintings and the image of Che's body. In her study of photography Sontag observes that, although a photograph's meaning and moral and emotional impact depend upon the context within which it is disseminated, the image's significance will never be fixed; every new contextual use (and particularly political use) of the image unravels the original and previous uses and contexts, which are eventually 'supplanted by subsequent uses – most notably, by the discourse of art into which any photo can be absorbed'. In this context, Sontag cites the radiophoto of Che's body as an example of images that 'right from the start' refer to other images, observing that 'what is compelling about the photograph partly derives from what it shares, as a composition, with these paintings'. Moreover, 'the very extent to which that photograph is



FIGURE 3 Asm (magazin), Buenos Aires, October 24, 1967.

unforgettable indicates its potential for being depoliticized, for becoming a timeless image'. In this sense, Sontag recalls Walter Benjamin's interest in the function of the photo caption as an instrument to 'rescue it from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it a revolutionary use value', and portrays Berger's text as an extended caption

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that seeks to ‘firm up the political associations and moral meaning of a photograph that Berger found too satisfying aesthetically, too suggestive iconographically’.

It is pertinent, therefore, to return once more to Berger’s text as probably the first attempt to re-interpret the significance of the image in question. Despite the representative intentions of the authorities, Berger suggests that the image’s impact was other. By interrogating its significance and establishing the comparisons already mentioned, Berger postulates certain compositional similarities between the photo and the two paintings and, in the case of Rembrandt’s painting, also registers a ‘functional’ resemblance with the photographic image. But alongside the functional, facial and corporeal similarities, Berger also posits an emotional echo between the photograph and Mantegna’s painting (figure 4). The sensations that invaded him upon seeing the photograph in the newspaper were very close to what he had imagined a contemporary believer might have felt before Mantegna’s *Dead Christ*, adding that:

When I look at the photograph now, I can only reconstruct my first incoherent emotions. Guevara was no Christ. If I see the Mantegna again in Milan, I shall see in it the body of Guevara. But this is only because in certain rare cases the tragedy of a man’s death completes and exemplifies the meaning of his whole life. I am acutely aware of that about Guevara, and certain painters were once aware of it about Christ. That is the degree of emotional correspondence.¹⁰

These observations on the reactions and reflections of artists and believers – conducted, the author admits, with the help of historical imagination – are interesting because they transport the normal process of pictorial referencing towards a more multi-faceted experience. In other words, a reading focused on the allegorical echoes between the secondary significance of this picture and the paintings already mentioned,¹¹ fundamentally connected to their compositional (and functional) similarities, could provoke a fundamental reorientation of the photograph’s essential sense towards a wholly artistic discourse, thus inhibiting its broad social scope. The cultural fluency required to successfully navigate the allegorical path traced by Joly (calling for the apprehension of a broad swathe of texts that bring known images, comprehended codes and familiar intertextual iconographs into play) is only available to a small part of the world’s population, a small section of enlightened individuals with access to universal culture and to a cultural capital that includes, at the very least, knowledge of art history. Nevertheless, alternative readings of the same photograph (or others) in the same context by other receptors, even where these were unfamiliar with the paintings cited, could still engender similar sensations and emotions to those described by Berger. For example, Christian traditions and iconography were elemental influences within Latin American popular culture; hence, the photograph’s resonance with representations of the Christ figure could call upon, but fundamentally transcend, knowledge of any particular works of art, tapping instead into the more generalized and extensive iconographic legacy of an imaginative tradition for which the adoration of saints and of the wounded or flagellated Christ was central.

Beyond any possible physical resemblance between an image of Che’s body and that of the historical and cultural Christ figure familiar in Western representation, therefore, it is possible to discern the evocation of a more faith- or gospel-inspired Christ and his messianic role and mission.¹²

In this sense, without ignoring the fact that the religious images are redolent with the kind of pain suffered by godlike figures and Christian martyrs, as opposed to the 'just' pain or 'deserved punishment' experienced by 'infidels',¹³ it could nevertheless be argued that, within the historical context of public expressions of progressive and even revolutionary tendencies within the Catholic Church, the image of 'Che-Christ' incorporates the necessary features to thus be adopted as a symbol of the fight for regional liberation. I refer here to a possible late 1960s re-signification of this photograph (and its other versions as disseminated by the global press) at the very moment when the life (and death) of Christ was being exposed to a similar re-reading. This period was characterized by political radicalization (Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, the Third World and May 1968), and a not unrelated religious radicalization that sought to articulate the Church's pastoral mission with revolutionary practice. A decade of dialogue between Catholics and Marxists gave rise to such phenomena as the 'worker priests' and the emergence in Latin America of what would soon be known as Liberation Theology. In 1968, the Latin American Episcopal Conference was held in Medellín. In 1967, the Latin American bishops published their 'options for the poor' and the Colombian guerrilla-priest Camilo Torres was killed in action. Torres, like Che, would soon be converted into a regional symbol (although not of the same magnitude as Guevara).¹⁴ In Argentina, for example, this process crystallized in May 1968 in the union of priests and lay members in the 'Movement of Priests for the Third World', whose message had been articulated and promoted since late 1966 in the pages of *Cristianismo y Revolución* (*Christianity and Revolution*) magazine, edited by ex-seminarist Juan García Elorrio.

At a time when another well-established popular figure – the bandit as the hero of social causes – made his politicized reappearance, it is not surprising that in several Bolivian villages, at the very moment when Che was conducting his guerrilla campaign nearby, a small poster appeared of a Christ-like figure, with matted hair and beard, gazing solemnly and piercingly out and accompanied by a text describing this Christ as an ill-fed working man of the common people who was hunted as a subversive and conspirator against the government of the day.¹⁵

Within this context, the image of a young, rebellious/revolutionary and even guerrilla Christ¹⁶ takes on great symbolic strength, thus provoking a necessary re-analysis of the conditions in which the images of Che's body were received in Latin America.

Of course, this remains only one of the possible imaginative horizons along which to trace the diverging interpretations of the significance of these photographs. It will always remain difficult to establish with any degree of precision the actual interpretation(s) applied to the image of Che's body, but a more viable analytical option is to examine the different ways in which that image was re-appropriated, for both cultural and political ends in, for example, Argentina in this same period.

III.

During the 1960s the figure of Che Guevara, with his associations to the Cuban Revolution, was an essential reference point for a broad spectrum of progressive or leftist cultural exponents and his execution had an immediate impact upon the work of Argentinean plastic artists.

This was a moment of artistic and political encounter which since the mid-1960s had given rise to, amongst other things, demonstrations against the US intervention in Vietnam, the infamous censorship of León Ferrari's entry for the 1965 Di Tella prize, *La civilización occidental y Cristiana* (*Western Christian Civilization*), and, between April and May of 1966, the collective exhibition in the Van Riel Gallery *Homenaje al Vietnam* (*Homage to Vietnam*) that brought together more than 200 artists from various aesthetic and political positions.

The military regime came to power in Argentina in June 1966 in the so-called 'Argentinean Revolution'. From the end of 1967 onwards a number of works, performances and collective exhibitions focused on the figure of Che were carried out with the participation of artists from many different aesthetic tendencies. These often presented images of Che in life, as a leader of the Cuban Revolution, as a 'heroic guerrilla', and were often interrupted by the censors.

As well as inspiring the first of two important collective exhibitions dedicated to Che held at the Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos (SAAP – Argentinean Association of Plastic Artists) in 1967 and 1968, Korda's image (or similar or allusive images, often put together *ad hoc*) was utilized (often in textiles or poster form) by divergent creators of political art at the time such as León Ferrari, Carlos Alonso, Ricardo Carpani, Antonio Berni and Roberto Jacoby.

In contrast to many of the other artists, Jacoby permitted himself a subtle provocation: within a special publication consisting of a 'magazine-envelope' containing leaflets, documents and comics on the contemporary political and cultural situation, Jacoby inserted an 'anti-poster'. Against a red background in the uppermost third of the poster, the artist placed a black and white reproduction of Korda's photograph accompanied by a simple but ingeniously challenging white text: 'A guerrilla doesn't die so you can stick him on the wall'.

Beyond this exceptional deployment (with all its precocious perspicacity), it is understandable that these images of Che were the most widely used in social struggles and political art of the period. But the image of Che's dead body was also utilized, both allusively and directly, as homage and as denunciation, with the work of Carlos Alonso offering some particularly interesting examples.

By the end of the 1960s Alonso had incorporated the main themes of Argentina's social and political reality into his work and had been actively involved in collective exhibitions such as those organized by SAAP, on whose executive committee he sat. Having followed the path of committed art in the 1950s and 1960s, 1967 saw Alonso distance himself from the Communist Party, of which he had been a member for many years, in the wake of the polemic stirred up by his daring look at the mangled body of the final phase of his one-time teacher Lino Enea Spilimbergo, who had died three years previously.

In subsequent years, and particularly in 1969 and 1971, Alonso returned often to the images from Vallegrande. He remembers being particularly drawn to photographs that appeared in Buenos Aires magazines such as the sensationalist *Así*, notable for the prominence it gave to the images and whose 24 October 1967 edition included, on both the front cover and the interior pages, three photos of Che's body at Vallegrande alongside either local villagers or military agents (figure 3).¹⁷

Unlike other artworks dealing with Che's death,¹⁸ Alonso does not focus on the Christ-like dimension of those images. Although the representation of Che's body is



FIGURE 4 Mantegna. Lamentation over the Dead Christ.

sometimes evocative of the physical positioning of Christ's corpse, in general it is the analytical gaze that predominates, related to the reinterpretation of Rembrandt's 'anatomy lessons' already mentioned.¹⁹ A number of Alonso's paintings, studies and sketches (pencil drawings, watercolours, inks, acrylics and collages) are testament to this exploration towards and encounter with Rembrandt's legacy in the series that Alonso entitled *La lección de Anatomía* (*The Anatomy Lesson*).

Along this trajectory, a number of works engage directly with the scene at Vallegrande, placing emphasis on its testimonial dimension and recording the media images taken there: Che's body, the soldiers and villagers, coming either closer or further away than they appeared in the original press photographs, such as in the drawing entitled *Che Guevara* (1970)²⁰ or in some of the more sophisticated paintings of those and subsequent years in which a heavily armed soldier accompanies Che's body (as if registering responsibility for the death) or in which the space is split between two opposing poles: soldiers and villagers, the latter portrayed on the frontier between lamentation and agitation (figure 5).²¹ In *Che*,²² despite the fact that the setting and the positioning of the principal characters is different from those in the photographs, the reference to Vallegrande remains significant.

Emerging from this exploration is an explicit link between the studies of Che's body and Alonso's series on meat.²³ In the drawing *Carne Argentina* (1970 – *Argentinean Meat*), for example, we see a cargo container (stamped with the words 'CARNE ARGENTINA') within which the inert body of Che lies on a stretcher with head raised and gaze meeting that of the spectator (figure 7). His hair is held by one soldier, who points at the body as if at captured prey, whilst alongside the body another two soldiers hold a photo of Che's face in life to enable unequivocal identification.²⁴

By far the most disturbing renditions of the images of Che's body are achieved through deployment of the Rembrandtean legacy, the principal inspiration being *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*. In some instances there are no references to the incidents in Bolivia (the body is not that of Che, but of other, anonymous individuals

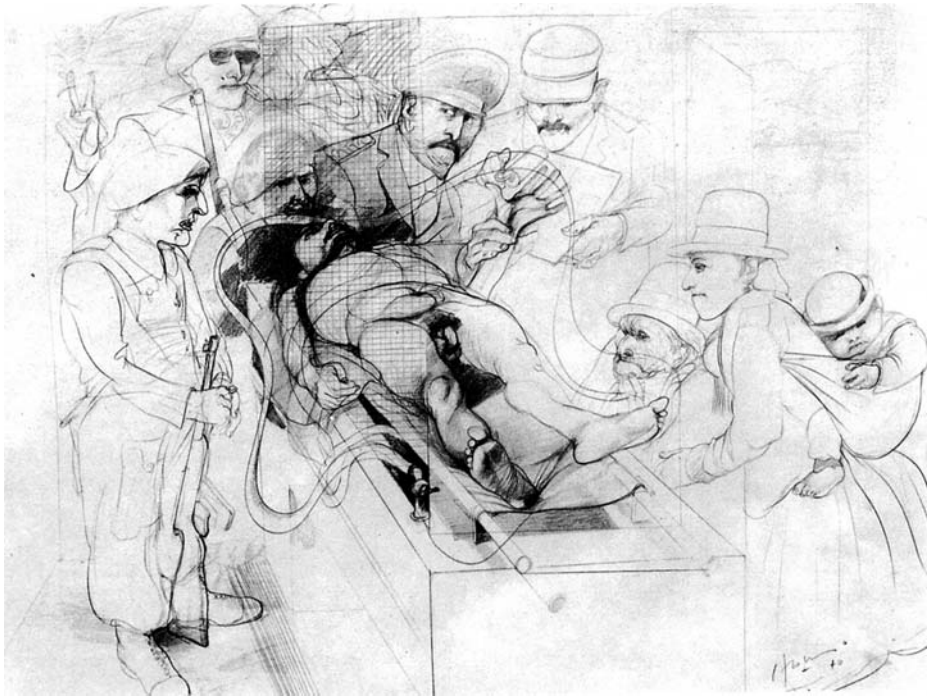


FIGURE 5 Carlos Alonso. *Che Guevara* (1970).

who are alive, are being tortured, or simply lie prone; the body of a woman in a sensual pose, a sick and malnourished child), in others – even where the body is still not Guevara’s – other characters around Tulp and his disciples (such as soldiers) or landscapes (a line of mountains on the horizon) do have a clear resonance with the Bolivian scene.

Amongst those works in which the bodies and faces are more easily identifiable as Guevara’s and, amongst the numerous sketches (from 1969–1970) in multiple techniques that were shown in the Buenos Aires (1971) and Rome (1977) exhibitions already mentioned, two large canvases merit further comment.²⁵

In the first (figure 6), the foreshortened and naked figure appears in the foreground, upon the stretcher and sink, open and bleeding from chest to waist. Behind the stretcher, the phantasmagorical silhouettes of Dr Tulp (who is lifting Che’s legs) and five of his disciples, (dressed in clothes and taking up poses analogous to Rembrandt’s painting) lean over the body. In the centre of the painting, Alonso introduces a contemporary figure: a nurse wearing the customary cap and surgical mask. The silhouettes’ positions are redolent of the theatrical poses captured by Rembrandt, but Alonso makes them almost caricaturesque, with pop influences and bright comic-like colours.²⁶

In the other painting the position of the body is different and the overall scene shares more similarities with that of Vallegrande. The characters circle the lacerated and bleeding body of Che, with the viscera exposed as in *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp*. The nurse appears once more, although more hidden behind Dr Tulp, wearing the same cap and mask and carrying a scalpel. Alongside, a medical machine connected by hosepipe to the tap on the sink circulates the blood of the body that lies



FIGURE 6 Carlos Alonso. *La lección de Anatomía* (1970).

prone in the stretcher. The clothes of two of the other figures identify them as Tulp's disciples but, unlike in the previous painting, these do not simply observe, but rather carry out the tasks of identification conducted by the Bolivian security forces in Vallegrande: one holds up a photo of Che's face in life (alluding to one of the images of Che's death that appeared in the press), another takes fingerprints from Che's right hand. Tulp also fulfils a similar role. Unlike in Rembrandt's canvas, in which Tulp uses pincers held in his right hand to extract the viscera, here Tulp holds the pincers in his left hand, raised towards his hat in a pompous gesture, whilst the index finger of his right hand points towards the wounds on the body, much like the Bolivian colonel in the press photo. Moreover, Alonso brings in other characters from Vallegrande: soldiers appear in the background and, next to Dr Tulp, a photographer is caught in the very act of taking the infamous shots.

Within this fascinating dialogue with Rembrandt and with the media images of Che's body, Alonso makes overt reference to the latter by framing his composition within a kind of television screen upon which can be seen part of the stretcher and the sink, Che's feet and the nurse's white apron in the foreground and part of one of the disciple's hats and the photographer's shoes at either side. In a similar vein, Antonio Berni made reference to the TV transmission of the scene at Vallegrande in a collage-painting produced in the same period. Che's body (accompanied in the background

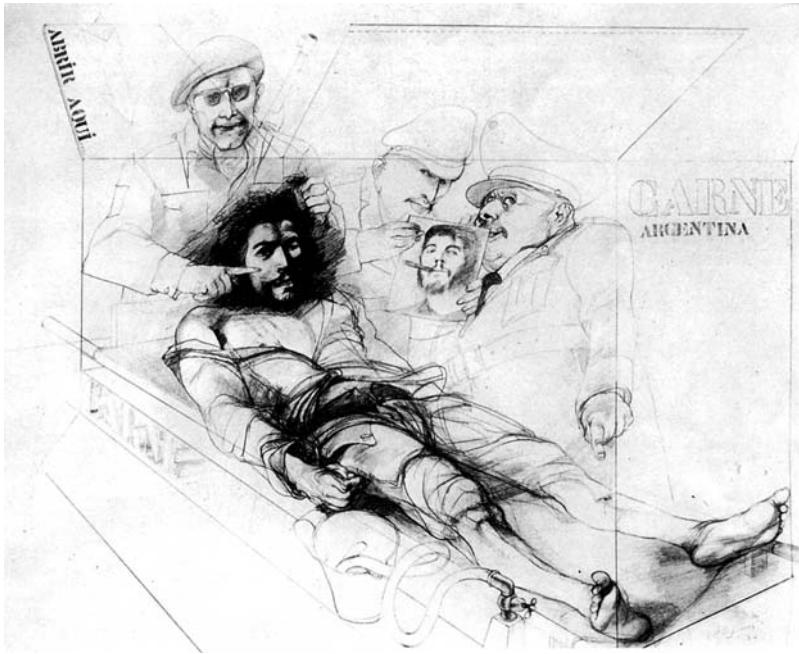


FIGURE 7 Carlos Alonso. *Carne Argentina* (1970).

by the prostrate body of one of the other executed guerrillas) appears on a TV screen in the centre of the piece highlighted with garish fuchsia and orange contours and surrounded by the cadaverous and monstrous faces and profiles of armed soldiers and authority figures.²⁷

As was to be expected, one of the first pieces from the *Anatomy Lesson* series, presented in 1969 at the 'Panorama de la Pintura Argentina II' (2nd Panorama of Argentinean Painting), organized by the Lorenzutti Foundation, was censored on the orders of the Ministry of Culture.

1969 also saw Alonso taking an active part in collective pieces and exhibitions such as the 'Hambre, basta' (Stop Hunger) mural and the 'Villa Quinteros también es América' (Villa Quinteros is America Too) and 'Malvenido Rockefeller' (Unwelcome Rockefeller) exhibitions. All are examples of artists tackling political topics at a time when the articulation of both spheres was widespread. But Alonso's *Anatomy Lesson* series goes much further, placing the aesthetic dimension at the very hub of the nexus between art and politics. Through its incorporation of the political pulse of the day into an ongoing dialogue with art history (as with his introduction of elements that evoke both the Holocaust and the war in Vietnam whilst also echoing the representation of hell in *The Divine Comedy*) and its anchorage in the solidity of a classic (in terms of theme, compositional strength, dramatic arrangement and the narrative of Rembrandtean group portraits), thus stimulating the kind of cultural mediation and concomitant cathartic distance necessary to 'comprehend' the representation of Che's death as an enunciatory image of the fundamental tensions in Latin America, Alonso's series is revealed as by far the most systematic and meritorious aesthetic examination of those infamous images of Che Guevara's dead body.

IV.

It is somewhat difficult to measure the social importance of these works of art in that period; their impact was simultaneously inhibited and stimulated by the prevalent censorship of the day. What can be analysed with more ease, however, is the clandestine circulation in the years immediately following Che's death of a masterpiece of political cinema: *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*) (1968) by Fernando Pino Solanas and Octavio Getino, which includes some of the images taken at Vallegrande at a critical moment in the film.

The film lasts more than four hours and is divided into three parts, distinguished by their structure, theme and even purpose. The title comes from a quote by the Cuban national hero, José Martí, adopted by Che Guevara in his message to the Tricontinental: 'Now is the time of furnaces and only light shall be seen'.

The images of Che's body and face, which in this instance are televisual images 'recuperated' for use in political cinema, appear at the end of the first part of the film and fulfil a pivotal role, illustrating the most viable option for an impoverished and dependent Latin America. The final scene of this section begins with hand-held camera footage of the funeral procession of a poor peasant in northern Argentina. Suddenly, the screen goes black and the voice-over – fulfilling the fundamental narrative role, as in an exposé documentary – asks the viewer: 'What is the only option left to Latin Americans?' The camera then scans over Che's body in the stretcher, moving upwards from the feet to the head to then pause and switch to a montage of Che's face which lasts for several frames. The next image shows half of the room (the upper part of Che's body and his face remain visible), with two soldiers in the top corners, as if on guard, and the centre occupied by local villagers who circle around the body. In the next scene the camera pans away from the lifeless bodies of Willy and 'el Chino' lying on the floor and moves towards Che's body on the concrete sink; there it freezes in a pan shot which shows a photographer (not Alborta) standing on top of the sink, as if on Che's body itself, taking pictures of the corpse. The voice-over answers its own question: 'Choose, with rebellion, its own life, its own death. When joining the fight for liberation, death ceases to be the final destination; death becomes liberation, conquest. He who chooses his own death also chooses a life'. Finally, the image of Che's dead face appears, looking forwards, occupying the full screen and staying for several minutes as if staring at the camera as the soundtrack plays the final phrase ('With rebellion, Latin America recovers its very existence') before ceding to a persistent percussion that accompanies the image of that face, interrogating the viewer with its gaze (figure 8).

For the directors – one-time leftist intellectuals who, by the time the film was made, had moved towards the political position of revolutionary Peronism – these images of Che occupied a pivotal point between the first part of the film (a denunciation of Latin American dependence) and the second (the history of what they considered to be Argentina's liberation movement, Peronism, and particularly the experiences of the so-called 'Resistance').

In a late-1969 letter to Alfredo Guevara (then head of the Cuban Film Institute – ICAIC), Solanas explains some of the messages that those scenes were intended to transmit and makes suggestions about the film's screening in Cuba, in what seems to be the Argentinean filmmaker's response to an earlier suggestion from the Cuban that the images of Che's corpse be removed for the Cuban screening.²⁸



FIGURE 8 *La hora de los hornos/The hour of the furnaces* (Solanas y Getiaio, 1968).

The complete excision of the sequence was impossible, the director insisted, since its message was fundamental to the film: 'the choice facing Latin America is the possibility of saving itself by choosing its own life and death'. In this sense the scene would deliver 'a provocative shock' in those countries where images of Che's body had been widely distributed as the kind of evidential tokens already mentioned. The image of the photographer straddling the corpse would have a particularly potent impact, clearly demonstrating 'the total dehumanization of the enemy in the face of the total humanization of Che, who stares out at us with a vivid gaze, even after death. An expression that synthesizes the phrase "WHEREVER DEATH SURPRISES US, WELCOME IT WILL BE", etc.'. Hence, the sequence would have 'fundamental importance' and 'far from oppressing or depressing, it will LIBERATE, STIMULATE, MOBILIZE, CHALLENGE PASSIVITY'.

These themes of provocation and accusation of spectatorial passivity resonate with experimental cultural tendencies at the time, in Argentina and internationally, which included debates on cinematographic form and took inspiration from 'manifestation-appeals' such as that contained in Frantz Fanon's phrase: 'Every spectator is a coward or a traitor'.²⁹ Fundamentally, however, as is perceived in the voice-over narration that accompanies this part of the film or as can be read in the letter from Solanas, the meaning attributed to those sequences is constructed upon imaginative foundations, upon an epochal discourse that brings guerrilla heroism and Christian martyrdom together.³⁰ In light of this, and bearing the conditions described in section II of this article in mind, therefore, we can conclude that the figure of *Che-Christ* remained valid within political cinema's exhortation to Latin American viewers (both real and

potential) to launch revolutionary action.³¹ And although at the end of the letter Solanas concedes that the image of the photographer standing over Che's body could be cut for the Cuban screening, he insists on leaving the rest of the sequence in place as 'the conclusion towards which the whole film flows'.

We are witnessing the introduction of a highly emotional and profoundly passionate dimension from where this film engages with the debate about the significance of those images and about the actual details of Che Guevara's death. Unlike other artistic-political uses of or references to the film footage or photographs of Che's body, this film opted to completely exclude any images that could add weight to the interpretation of this event as 'a defeat for that struggle and a victory for the *gorilas*' (anti-Peronists) (as stated in Solanas's letter), such as those of the Bolivian soldiers alongside the body. Instead, the film emphasizes those images of the peasants circling the body, caught between simple curiosity and outright veneration. Although displaying a quite different spatial logic, the body of Christ is similarly surrounded by peasants in the Mantegna painting with which Berger established the aforementioned compositional and emotional resonance.

At the end of the 1960s and within the context outlined above, therefore, the use of these images in Solanas and Getino's film does not invite viewers to venerate the figure of Che in its own right, but rather pay homage to him as a viable example to follow, despite his death, at a time of resurgent class struggle in Argentina and across the region.

Nevertheless, this remains only one visual option amongst many. Whereas these images may well have served the Argentinean directors' aims to do nothing less than inflame regional insurrection, and, in this sense, share a broad platform with the Cuban Revolution, Caribbean filmmakers were interested in promoting a different image of Che, convinced that the footage of the photographer straddling his body and indeed any images of his corpse could become a powerful symbol of defeat. But this was not the only reason for these divergent deployments of the images.

Documentary maker Santiago Alvarez³² recalls the 'fierce discussions' that leading figures in Cuban cinema had about the Argentinean film, suggesting that most did not agree with the way in which the images of Che's body had been utilized: 'We're talking about ideas we had about displaying images of Che's corpse and the way it was presented at the end of the first part of the film. That deathly face, the open eyes, staring at the camera; it all seemed very violent to me.' Alvarez, who reported from some of the bloodiest areas of conflict of that period, (particularly Vietnam) remembers many discussions in those years about images of slain martyrs and fallen heroes, suggesting that there were basically 'two positions'. The Vietnamese, he says, utterly abhorred those images, the Cubans did not. And yet, back in Cuba and involved in the arguments about the projection of pictures of Che's body, Alvarez found himself using many Vietnamese-type arguments: 'When we were in Vietnam with the news service (ICAIC), they used to ask us why we insisted on showing images of the wounded or of dead bodies, that it wasn't appropriate [...]. They were very reluctant to let us film even a single dead body. And we would try to convince them that those images would be very useful in the forums at which the Vietnam War was being discussed [...]. But later, when we discussed the images of Che's body, although the circumstances were different, it seemed as if we had come around to the Vietnamese way of seeing things.'³³

Other Cuban filmmakers, directly and indirectly involved in the debates of the time, believe that the images of Che's corpse could provoke confusing sensations of defeat, aggression and violence which, far from mobilizing viewers, would do much harm. Director Octavio Cortázar, for example, suggests that: 'the images of the photographer who, with such utter irreverence, had climbed astride Che's body and was taking photos of him, and that terrible image of Che with his eyes open, could actually do real damage to the sensibilities of the Cuban people. Those images were too violent to show even in countries where Che had no special connotation [...]. For us Che was a symbol of revolutionary triumph, a beautiful man who was deeply cherished and respected by our people. That image was so violent; you have to understand that it was very important for us to treasure other memories of him.'³⁴

To comprehend this attitude we must bear in mind that other images of Che Guevara held pride of place in the Caribbean imagination: those of René Burri and Alberto Korda, and many of the others that are known around the world and on which we have already commented. Moreover, Cuban cinema had accumulated many moving images of Che during the 1960s. According to director José Massip, commenting in early 1968 in *Cine Cubano* magazine (no. 47), held in the archives of ICAIC and of the Cuban Radio Institute (ICR), there were three principal groups of cinematographic material about Che: speeches, overseas travel and images of his life in Cuba. It was these types of images and representations that were screened in Cuba in the years following Che's death.

It is understandable, therefore, that the conclusion of the first part of *La hora de los hornos* was uncomfortable for filmmakers and senior officials in Cuba both as a symbol of defeat and as a catalyst for aggression, as discussed above.³⁵ They were able to reject the film's conclusion because of the reservoir of alternative images in which Che appeared as a vital force, a man who, from the very outset, worked in word and action for and on behalf of the Cuban Revolution. This Che as 'leader', 'builder'³⁶ and 'heroic guerrilla', as portrayed in Korda's photograph so charged with symbolic power, was an appropriate foundation from where to promote Revolutionary continuity, notwithstanding Che's own death.

Although Korda's photograph was also widely and consistently used in Argentina, particularly in the spheres of cultural production, in no way does this overshadow the prevalence and potency of the image of Che's corpse in important works of Argentinean art, such as those we have already discussed.

V.

It was also during those years that some voices were raised about political risk involved in delegating responsibility for necessarily collective processes of social transformation to individual heroes. Discussing his story 'Un oscuro día de justicia' ('A Dark Day of Justice'), completed just one month after Che's death, writer and journalist Rodolfo Walsh³⁷ recalls the references in the text to the supreme lesson for 'the people': finding themselves alone and burdened with the concomitant duty to fight against the hope for salvation deposited in 'external heroes'. Walsh considered this lesson applicable in the Argentinean context where salvation was sought either in Peronism or

through figures such as Che. Walsh recalls the lamentation following Che's death and the belief that, if only he had still been alive, all would have joined his cause. 'A totally mystical notion [argues Walsh] a myth of one person or one hero making a revolution instead of an entire people coming together in revolution. The supreme expression of the people may well be a hero figure, such as Che Guevara, but [...] no isolated individual, regardless of their stature or standing, can do anything if alone'. Instead, Walsh proposed a search for a 'collective hero': the people, which in many ways he had been elucidating throughout the two previous years on the pages of *Semanario CGT* (*CGT Weekly*), the official publication of the workers' union opposed to the dictatorship of General Onganía.³⁸

Myth, sanctity, heroism, sacrifice, the people: the threads of an imaginative tapestry dominated by the figure of Che Guevara; the image of his corpse that resists the simple symbolism of defeat with which the authorities tried to bind it, illuminating instead the praxis of transformation, in the style of a Sorelian myth, perhaps.

John William Cooke³⁹ began some notes on Che Guevara immediately after the execution at La Higuera, but had not completed them one year later when he himself died in September 1968. The notes are of interest as another skein pulled into the tapestry and alluding again to the image that concerns us in this article. Cooke, a senior official and principal ideologue of revolutionary Peronism, heard of Che's death in London, to where he had travelled after leading the Argentinean delegation in the OLAS (Organization of Latin American Solidarity) Conference in Havana.⁴⁰

In these pages Cooke portrays Che as a common man who rejected heroism as an 'aristocratic prerogative', favouring instead a democratic understanding of the concept based on collective action. Cooke rejects all kind of canonization, seeking instead to insert Che's legacy within ongoing struggles: 'It is our task to ensure that the admiration and respect of the common people is transformed into true knowledge and empathy and is not channelled into any kind of legendary or historical sterility that robs Che of his present truth in favour of the stale immortality of a wax museum.'

Cooke rejects all portrayals of Che as a man 'entranced by death' as interpretations that distort the facts and blur Guevara's true historical importance. Recognizing that Che's experiences of guerrilla warfare meant that death was not unfamiliar, Cooke argues that a true revolutionary (Che or Cooke himself) doesn't look for death, but for victory.

Whilst recognizing that the immediate consequences of Che's death are 'very serious' for revolutionary movements, Cooke elucidates a novel facet of this event that is worth examining: the reaction of the Argentinean working classes to the 'murdered compatriot'. Walsh believes that the emotional impact of the events at La Higuera could lead to Che's incorporation within certain codes of popular culture ('the cult of courage, the disparaging of the law as something alien, imposed on common people "from above", the identification with rebels') along the same lines as 'those heroes from plebeian traditions who live on in memory across the generations'. Cooke recovers, therefore, the 'common approach', turning to it for explanation within 'the models that form part of his cultural baggage' and invoking 'the notion of sanctity applied to the secular' or the characterization of Che by Father Benítez as 'a Christian hero'. In this sense, Cooke believes that 'Che's brutally eloquent ending was like a flash of lightning that suddenly illuminated his whole admirable trajectory, infilling his still diffuse image

with the features of a saint or of a hero and establishing thus the intimate link that binds both archetypes with the common people, who recognize in them their own likeness'. For Cooke, therefore, the popular intuition of the common people immediately comprehended the historic gravity of the events at La Higuera.

Alongside these and other observations made before Cooke's death are some notes that the author was never able to elaborate upon. As Horacio Ganzolez has already noted, these demonstrate Cooke's interest in 'the paradoxical themes of destiny and action: the abstraction of historical myth and the praxis with which it is deployed in the interaction of sensibility and death'.⁴¹ In this list of themes one is entitled 'corpse'.⁴² Although references to this are scant,⁴³ it seems likely that if Cooke had been able to conclude his notes, he too would have pondered the significance of the last sacred image of the Latin American revolution.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

- 1 The Swiss photographer René Burri rediscovered his famous 1963 portrait of a 'triumphant' Che printed on cushions for sale in shops along the Champs-Élysées (cited in: Michel Guerrin, 1988. *Profession Photoreporter*. Paris: Gallimard, 167).
- 2 These aspects do appear in some biographies, however; see, for example, the brief commentary on some of the photographs in the illustrated book *Che, sueño rebelde*, Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1997, pp. 188–95, text by Matilde Sánchez.
- 3 Alborta's detailed memories and Katz's careful edition effectively lead the spectator into the scene at Vallegrande: through the scant, but exceptional film clips incorporated into the documentary, through the subtle 'animation' of the image achieved through the overlaying of photos of those surrounding the corpse, through the image of a nurse that 'turns' towards the soldiers, through the picture of Che's face that 'moves forwards' as Alborta recalls the impression the scene made upon him.
- 4 Umberto Eco. 1986. *La guerre du faux*, in the 'Lire les choses: un photo' section. Paris: Grasset. Cited in: Martine Joly. 2003. *La imagen fija*. Buenos Aires: La Marca, 160–1.
- 5 Jorge Castañeda. 1998. Muero porque no muero (I die because I won't die). *Cinemas d'Amérique latine* (Toulouse) 6.
- 6 *Aperture*. 1968. Che Guevara Dead, 13 (4): 36–8.
- 7 Martine Joly, op. cit., p. 169.
- 8 Rocco Mangieri. 1998. El cuerpo del Che: el gesto que muestra, el dedo que apunta (Che's body: the gesture that suggests and the finger that aims). *Cuadernos de Investigación y Documentación* 1: 34–9 (Mérida: Universidad de los Andes). My thanks to Gustavo Aprea for pointing me towards this text and for his gracious reading of and comments upon the present article.
- 9 Susan Sontag. 1996. *Sobre la fotografía* (1977). Barcelona: Edhasa, 116–9 (2002). *On Photography*. London: Penguin Books, 106–8).

- 10 John Berger, 'Che Guevara Dead', op. cit.
- 11 Others could include Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (see *Che, sueño rebelde*, op. cit., pp. 194–5), Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Joan Deyman*, which evokes Mantegna's *Christ*, or others referred to in Mangieri, op. cit.
- 12 Peter Malone. 1997. Jesus on Our Screens. In *New image of religious film*, edited by John R. May. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward. My thanks to Ricardo Yañez for supplying this text.
- 13 A point referred to by the artist León Ferrari in his ethical interrogation of the representation of Biblical violence in the frescoes, sculptures and paintings of the great masters of Western art.
- 14 This opinion was shared by *La Prensa* (Argentine conservative newspaper) (11 October 1967), which compared both deaths in an editorial signed by Carlos Villar-Borda.
- 15 Poster discovered by Leandro Katz during his research for *El día que me quieras*.
- 16 According to Beatriz Sarlo, the image of a guerrilla Christ achieved such iconographic status in *Cristianismo y Revolución* that in 1971 the magazine published a small drawing of Christ carrying a rifle. Sarlo describes 'a very young Christ, straight from a Pasolini film (...), a stylized icon or *art deco* drawing, with long straight hair, a perfectly symmetrical beard, head crowned with a saintly halo, face fixed in a steely gaze from squinting eyes (a wholly contemporary image, pop-inspired, heavy on the hippie and rock prophet); he bears an ultra-modern rifle on his shoulder, the geometrically perfect barrel of which forms the clear straight frame of the whole illustration' (2003. *La pasión y la excepción*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 166–87).
- 17 Not necessarily taken by Alborta. Following Che's death, most Argentinean newspapers and magazines did not publish the Alborta photo upon which this article focuses. The exception is *La Razón*, which published it (or a similar version) as a United Press radiophoto on 11 October 1967.
- 18 Juan Carlos Castagnino, in a version of his 1967 *Homenaje al Che (Homage to Che)* and in a 1970 poster-homage entitled *Octubre (October)*, painted a frontal view of Che's foreshortened body and face not as prone, but rather in clear allusion to the crucified Christ. See the catalogue from the *Arte y política en los años sesenta (Art and politics in the 1960s)* exhibition, curated by Alberto Giudici (Palais de Glace, 2002), pp. 107–13.
- 19 In 1965, Alonso exhibited his *Homenaje a Rembrandt (Homage to Rembrandt)* in the Nice Galería de Arte.
- 20 Included in an Alonso exhibition in the Galería Giulia in Rome in 1977. A preliminary version also appeared in a 1971 exhibition at the Galería de Arte Esmeralda, Buenos Aires. Both catalogues were consulted in the Fundación Espigas.
- 21 See, for example, details from *Lección de anatomía (Anatomy Lesson)* no. 2 (acrylic on canvas, 1970) and from *La muerte del Che (Che's death)* (acrylic and oil on canvas, 1978), in: VVAA, *Carlos Alonso (Auto)biografía en imágenes (Carlos Alonso: (Auto)biography in images)*, op. cit., pp. 98–9.
- 22 An etching and aquatint shown at the 'Carlos Alonso. Hay que comer' (Carlos Alonso: One Must Eat) exhibition (Museo de la Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, 2004). Although dated 1977 in the exhibition, the date on the canvas is 1971.
- 23 The corporeal theme came to the fore during different periods of Alonso's career. With initial explorations in *El Matadero (The Slaughterhouse)* and *Hay que comer*, meat as an aesthetic theme came to prominence in Alonso's work after 1972.

- 24 Galería Giulia's catalogue (op. cit.)
- 25 Both from 1970. Reproduced in: VVAA, *Carlos Alonso. (Auto)biografía en imágenes*, op. cit., pp. 96 and 97. Also see María Teresa Constantin's text 'Un espacio para el dolor' ('A Space for Pain'); pp. 91–4.
- 26 Alonso also has one of the disciples asking: 'What did he die of?', to which Tulp replies: 'VERMOORD DOOR CIA' (murdered by the CIA).
- 27 Tempera on paper and collage, reproduced in Giudici, op. cit., p. 92. Although less well known, Berni produced other pieces on Che's death, most in paper.
- 28 The letter (a typed copy of which is archived in the Cuban Film Library) is dated 3 November 1969. The quotations, including capitalizations and underlining that follow, are taken from that typed copy.
- 29 Utilized in the film and on a banner that was hung underneath the screen during showings.
- 30 Sarlo (op. cit.) refers to the 'sacrificial ethic' of the revolutionary that she believes was embodied in Che. She identifies the image of his corpse with an image of Christ, 'the synthesis of immobile beauty and fatal determination'. 'In a Christianity of the poor, a Christianity of rage and violence [she adds] the image of the slain revolutionary was imbued with sanctity as his death came about through a conscious and welcomed search for sacrifice.'
- 31 Although there is no suggestion here that these tendencies were consciously and explicitly adopted by Solanas y Getino, they undoubtedly contributed to the 'epochal' atmosphere and should be considered amongst the contributing elements of the film's discourse.
- 32 Who directed *Hasta la victoria siempre (Ever Onwards to Victory)* that was screened on 18 October 1967 on a giant screen in Plaza de la Revolución in Havana when the official announcement of Che's death was made.
- 33 Author's interview with S. Alvarez, Havana, 1996.
- 34 Author's interview with O. Cortázar, Havana, 1996.
- 35 We should not underestimate the 'disagreeable', 'aggressive' (in its more quotidian sense), 'hurtful' and 'depressing' qualities of the image of Che's corpse for many Cubans who share this attitude towards him.
- 36 See: Pedro Chaskel. 1998. *Rostros del Che (Faces of Che)*. *Cinemas d'Amérique Latine* (Toulouse) 6: 98–100.
- 37 Article by Ricardo Piglia (March, 1970), published in: *Un oscuro día de justicia*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1973. In his search for an appropriate form of testimonial literature, Walsh had considered (in late 1968) Solanas y Getino's film as one possible avenue of exploration (R. Walsh. 1996. *Ese hombre y otros papeles personales (That Man and other Personal Papers)*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 92, 94 and 95).
- 38 See: M. Mestman. 1997. *Semanario CGT*. Rodolfo Walsh: periodismo y clase obrera (CGT Weekly. Rodolfo Walsh: journalism and the working class). *Causas y Azares* (Buenos Aires) 6: 193–208.
- 39 Published at the time by his wife and comrade Alicia Eguren, and later re-edited in *La escena contemporánea (The Contemporary Scene)*, Buenos Aires, no. 3 (1999).
- 40 Cooke had developed close ties with the Cuban Revolution and a political and personal bond with Che, whom he had seen for the last time in Cuba in 1965.
- 41 Horacio González. 'Fotocopias anilladas' ('Ringed Photocopies'), *La nación subrepticia (The Surreptitious Nation)*. Buenos Aires: El Astillero, 37–8.

- 42 The citation of the presence of this ‘impestuous word’ in Cooke’s notes as well as the expression used in the title of this article are taken from González (op. cit.).
- 43 Reference is made, for example, to the disappearance of Che’s body (because of ‘an imbecilious *gorila* fetish’) which Cooke compares to the fate suffered by Eva Perón’s corpse.

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