Revolution and Consumption in Postmodern Cuban Culture

BY FRANK VALED

There is no denying that the Cuban Revolution has inevitably altered the terms of Cuban cultural identity. The Revolution has impacted our perception of Cuban art, music and food, and has been a catalyst for casting divisions in Cuban cultural life in general. It has separated island Cubans from the exodus community. Those in power have deliberately created a variety of perceptions of the Revolution of 1959 by manipulating its portrayal in both the popular press and the arts. It is where these two worlds—the popular press and the arts, which have been so manipulated in Cuba since 1959—come together that the recent work of Cuban artists Jose Toirac and Pedro Alvarez can be situated. Their work portrays a critically postmodern view of the Revolution and its interplay with/effect on culture.

Postmodernism in socialist Cuba? What is this? Generally, cultural production is immediately termed postmodern, in almost any culture, when it takes the identity of a “crisis project.” In the example of Latin America this is true of work on the crisis of the political left, particularly when dealing with the failings of the socialist project in Cuba. Reality struck a cord when Cuba had to implement its “special period” after the abandonment of Soviet subsidies in the early 1990s. In the “special period” the utopian ideology of the Cuban revolution began to lose credibility when it faced the reality of a shortage of food, which exposed the regime as perhaps being one of more image than substance.

The epidemic loss of faith in the possibility of socialist utopia has had a deep effect on all sectors of Cuban cultural life. Particularly it has engendered a rise of a postmodern, post-utopian sensibility among Cuban artists. Accordingly, the essence of the postmodernist debate in Latin America is not a game of categorizing postmodern works and tactics in art, but an attempt by artists to redefine the actual links between aesthetics and politics in an age of catastrophic social change.

It is in the tight space left between aesthetics and politics under postmodernity that one can begin to look for the work of Jose Toirac. To use capitalist consumerism as an instrument of critique, Toirac, a painter by trade, finds himself of necessity appropriating the advertising graphics and photography of others to generate much of his imagery. His work often criticizes modes of representation, especially those sanctioned by the Cuban government. Some of the images manipulated by Toirac are deconstructions of political representations of official discourse. These images are simply displaced and represented in a new and different context, usually a capitalist one, by Toirac. This destruction and reconstruction of revolutionary images forms a new mode representation which reveals new messages and meanings.

According to Toirac, the only truthful way to represent the Cuban Revolution is to represent it for what it is—a contemporary image. Not as reality, but as a representation of what “was” or “was to be” the “revolutionary ideal.” Photographs by Raul Corales and Alberto Korda of Cuban revolutionaries—including Castro in the Sierra Maestra during the Revolution—offer clear “presentations” of the “revolutionary ideal.” Taken in 1960 and 1962, the photographs are obviously post-Revolution propaganda, not unlike Roosevelt re-enacting his own battles for film crews. Castro had inevitably realized the importance of public image and returned to the Sierra Maestra in the early 60’s to stage these “revolutionary” scenarios for media consumption. When asked about his impressions of the theatrical quality of these photographs, Toirac simply answered, “Fidel es un artista...” Fidel is an artist.

Toirac is by no means implying that Castro is a con artist, but rather he sincerely believes that Castro is an artist. Castro composes political scenarios, and understands their cultural operations, the way an artist composes a canvas. Castro has himself been indoctrinated by mass cultural strategies, and is aware of the power and importance of visual imagery in that society. The photographs clearly exploit the modes of dissemination of the capitalist system he rejects. Toirac uses these images in his work. By exposing the affiliations between aesthetics and politics within the Cuban Revolution, Toirac reveals how the myth of photo-
graphic objectivity is used to construct a history, which in turn, serves to legitimize, consolidate, and perpetuate power. But there is more; the layer Toirac adds to the photographic propaganda is a layer of consumer culture imagery specifically selected by the artist for its punning or symbolic meaning(s) that are able to penetrate (expose) the propaganda itself.

The literary critic Gregory Ulmer asserts that postmodern deconstruction is in fact accomplished by borrowing the very terms utilized by the host work itself and removing or detaching them from one conceptual set or semantic field and reattaching them to another. This appears to be both the technique and the motivation behind Toirac’s work.

Toirac’s New Times Series

It is evident, especially in Cuba, that the socialist crisis in Latin America has caused drastic political and cultural changes. The re-emergence of capitalist forms of advertisement are to be listed among these changes and are a central theme in Toirac’s New Times series. This series uses political advertisements, Cuban press photographs of the governmental movers and shakers, and consumer oriented commercial advertising as the the host to the work. By detaching the original message of those images and reattaching them to others in unique ways, new and often very cynical messages from a post-utopian Cuba are created in this series.

In “Trumpf” the triumph of the Revolution is conveyed through the immediately recognizable image of the young revolutionaries, Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, entering victoriously into Havana in 1959, while the opposing message of the recent triumph of capital is conveyed by the equally recognizable red, diamond shaped Trumpf logo of the German candy corporation owned by the art collector Peter Ludwig. The painting has a number of meanings. The reference to Ludwig’s candy company alludes to the current return of a pre-Revolutionary condition in Cuba wherein Cuba acts primarily as a producer of cheap raw materials for foreign manufacturers.

In 1989, Ludwig came to the Third Havana Biennal and bought great quantities of contemporary Cuban art. Apparently however, Ludwig did not come to Cuba solely for that purpose. He may have also been there to negotiate with the Cuban government to export cheap Cuban cocoa and sugar to Germany. Ludwig could then turn around and import expensive German chocolate to the Cuban people. The allusion to this sort of economic policy in Toirac’s “Trumpf” painting makes Castro’s 1953 “History will absolve me” speech seem particularly ironic, and ring particularly false today. As a condemnation of the pre-Revolutionary regime of Fulgencio Batista, in that speech Castro had lamented that Cuba “exports sugar to import candy...”

The Trumpf logo is also a particularly cogent signifier within the Cuban art world itself. From 1959 to 1989, Cuban art was largely absent from the international art market. But in 1989, exactly 30 years after Castro and his rebels triumphantly entered Havana, Ludwig triumphantly entered the Cuban art scene. Since 1989, the interests of an international art market (singularly personified by Ludwig,) have replaced the State as the primary patron of young Cuban artists. The obvious play on words of Trumpf/triumph is thus a poignant, wry commentary on the more pragmatic than revolutionary “triumph” of socialism in post-utopian Cuba.

Toirac’s deconstruction of revolutionary triumph offers a compelling critique of the theatrically orchestrated political image and of the failure of its emancipatory message.

The work in this series also critiques Western representations of consumerism and its common message of want and consumption as the central needs of the people in contemporary culture. For example, the conceptual impact of a term such as eternity is appropriated by advertisers in contemporary culture. In order to sell perfume, Calvin Klein labeled one fragrance Eternity. While this aggrandizes perfume, the concept of eternity is trivialized through its use as a logo. Toirac picks up on this in his painting “Eternity”, wherein he appropriates Klein’s logo, with its new trivialized concept of eternity, and super-imposes it over an
official image of Castro's performing his anti-imperialism speech. The consumer image becomes an accomplice to the political speech act of Castro. By superimposing a text that signifies consumerism onto an image that immediately signifies socialist Cuba, Toirac exploits an inversion of socialist narrative in which political ideology is incrementally being pragmatized and replaced with slogans, as per modern consumerism. The paradoxical combination of the ad and the political photo creates a new compound image which effectively communicates the current impermanence and legitimation crisis of socialist ideology in Cuba.

The painting “Havana Cigars” also touches upon the current ideological shifts in Cuba. The message is delivered by the direct appropriation of the text from a Cuban magazine ad for Cuban cigars. The text; “Even a masterpiece may not last forever...,” is superimposed over an image of Castro as a young revolutionary. The comic intention is understood immediately—the viewer’s nervous laughter registers uncertainty amidst an uncertain society.

Toirac’s work is broadly political in the sense that it deconstructs ideologies. But his most powerful imagery is a result of the deconstruction of the specificities of Cuban politics. In this light, the issue of censorship is relevant. Although Toirac has not been specifically prohibited from creating his imagery, exhibitions of his work in venues outside of the Cuban curatorial ability to control its message and reading have been prohibited.

Toirac has stated that, “Censorship, more than outright prohibition, represents one of the mechanisms that power uses to mask its relations. . . . Manipulation, for its part, entertains the prohibitions of power, but also negotiates its tolerance.” For Toirac, distinctions between governmental censorship and artistic manipulation are but a few of the many aspects of repetition and appropriation that are employed in the formation and dispersal of meaning. Censorship and manipulation are therefore elements to be incorporated, deconstructed, and recontextualized.

As it became apparent that the exhibition in the United States of the original New Times series would not be permit-

By the Cuban Consejo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Toirac created a second version. Apropos to his interest in the transformation of meaning through the appropriation and repetition of the image, Toirac appropriated himself in this second version. The second version, identical to the first in terms of style, title, and dimensions, substituted the face of the artist’s wife, Meira Marrero, for that of Fidel Castro. Thus Meira Marrero is simply a code for the meanings intended.

As we have seen in the work of Toirac, the failures of the emancipatory project of Cuban socialism—especially since Cuba is seen, and sees itself, as the model for socialist revolution among many Third World countries—have played an important role in determining the specific shape of postmodern cultural production in Cuba. For other Cuban artists, these failures are registered in themes of a temporality and nostalgia, when likened to the collapse of a Marxism which privileges time as the main element through which forward progress is understood. Not as a nostalgia for lost narratives and lost utopias, but a pragmatic progression towards a better future replaces the concept of a return to, or the “presence of,” the past. It is in terms of a temporal, nostalgic aspect of Cuban postmodernism that we can describe the work of Pedro Alvarez.

Pedro Alvarez: Havana Dollarscape

Cuban history often surfaces in contemporary Cuban art in the form of familiar, popular images and stereotypes from Cuba’s colonial past. The historical narratives in an Alvarez painting appear to take place in a vague temporality where the landscape is populated with icons from various periods in Cuban history which revisit Cuba’s present like ancestral ghosts.

In the painting entitled “After Andalucia,” a bust of Karl Marx becomes the object of a servant’s affections and the target for an Alvarez parody. Alvarez appropriated the parody from the nineteenth-century artist Victor Landaluce’s painting “Don Francisco.” Landaluce is well known in Cuba and elsewhere for social caricature; the
Government funded "graffiti" in Havana
images in his paintings often represent the picturesque and the cliche elements of nineteenth century Cuban culture. According to Alvarez, Landlue's images represent a fundamental referent for a reconstructed image of Cuba that is an idealization without conflict, essentialism or temporality.

Cubans experience the presence of the past in their day-to-day lives. A sense of temporality is felt quite strongly in the contradictions that show themselves daily in the streets of Havana. Government sponsored political graffiti of a now defunct utopia continues to share Cuban streets with colonial architecture and American cars from the 1950's.

In a painting by Alvarez entitled “We will not return to the past, not ever,” he incorporates Landlue’s “Preparing for the Fiesta.” Landlue’s *mulata* are shown washing a shiny, new, 1950 Chevrolet parked in front of a banner heralding the familiar revolutionary slogan of the 1960’s, “Al pasado no regresaremos”: “we will not return to the past, not ever.”

In the background fly the flags of the neo-colonial empires: the US, the former USSR and Spain. Still further back in this landscape of many temporalities are the monuments to Cuba’s independence of the late nineteenth century, and to the Cuban Republic era of the 1920’s through the 1950’s. Alvarez appears to be posing the question: to which past will Cuba return in the future?

Alvarez seems to have answered his own question in a recent series called *Havana Dollarscape*. There are six paintings in this series depicting US bills in 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 dollar denominations. The political iconography of this US currency is superimposed onto the Havana cityscape. For instance, in the painting entitled “20,” we see Andrew Jackson’s image in the foreground gazing out at the viewer. Behind him is an American car from the 1950’s and Landlue’s *mulatas* at market. In the far background the White House, a landmark of the US political landscape, is incongruously set into the Cuban tropical landscape. In front of the White House, a remnant of the colonial wall of Old Havana mediates between the foreground and background.

Ironically, in the actual Cuban landscape the former Cuban presidential palace which was transformed by the Revolu-

tion into the National Museum of the Cuban Revolution sits behind the remnant of the old city wall precisely where the White House is superimposed. Today the museum charges admission in dollars and is a popular tourist attraction. Thus the “20” and the rest of this series address the current return of problems associated with consumerism and culture, and the renewed presence of the US dollar as a dominant—and recently instituted legal—form of currency in Cuba.

In the work of Alvarez and Toirac, the rise of consumerism in Cuba is largely manifested as a re-emergence of the capitalist forms of advertising and the reprivatization of the economy by foreign investment. There also exists an emergence of work that deals with other topics where the presence of the past is manifested as a re-opening to tourism.

For example, in Cuba *jineteo* refers to certain sorts of economic exchange associated with the collapse of a socialist economy and the increased foreign, tourist and general economic presence of others on the island. This is of interest in the fact that the term *jineteo* comes from the Spanish verb, *jinetear*, which literally means “to jockey”. *Jiniterismo*, then, can simply mean “providing basic tourist services.” These might be chauffeur services by locals, guide services, or interpreters’ services. However, *jinetario* can also unfortunately refer to illicit sexual prostitution offered by women called *jineiras*. In a series like *Havana Dollarscape*, the potential confusion between tourism as a simple economic exchange, and tourism as a prostitution of one’s own culture and identity “offered” to others, is seriously brought to the fore.

Alvarez and Toirac understand that power can be consolidated and perpetuated by linking ideology to the careful manipulation and orchestration of imagery. For political ideology and capitalist economies alike, power is so consolidated. Their art exposes this linkage by appropriating the methods common to revolutionary politics and commercial capitalism.

Although they do set the stage for the many concerns of the current situation of the Revolution coexisting with a
consumer attitude in Cuba, it would be naive to project the political or historical impact of contemporary Cuban artists such as Alvarez and Toirac at this time. However, there are conclusions which can be reached with some degree of certainty. Initially, I would say that the critical description of Cuban postmodern cultural production as “pseudo-postmodernism” is culturally biased and self-negating insofar as postmodernity in itself disavows a discourse of authenticity. Secondly, if we accept Frederic Jameson’s description of postmodernity as an expression of the inner truth of the newly emergent social order of late capitalism, then Cuban postmodern cultural production can be understood as an expression of an equally new social order. This new order is defined by the disenchantment with late socialism, by a current post-utopian era in Cuba, and is characterized by the emergence, rise and dominance of consumer capitalist practices in contemporary Cuban culture.

It seems the reason that some critics view Cuban art as “pseudo-postmodern” lies in their own politics of interpretation in the formation of a discourse. Cuban art to this day continues to be wrongly described by the dialectical terms of the nationally authentic versus the culturally dependent. But cultural dependency in the late twentieth century is a highly problematic and relative phrase. In fact, the work of Alvarez and Toirac demonstrates that Cuba is not the hermetic, culturally isolated island some believe it to be. Cuba continues to be a crossroads between Old World and New; First World and Third, center and periphery and politics and aesthetics—and Cuban postmodern cultural production continues the dialectic that allows it to function in that way.

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