

El día que me quieras: History, Myth and Che Guevara

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*Acaricia me ensueño el suave murmullo de tu suspirar
Coma ríe la vida si tus ojos negros me quieren mirar.
Y se es mío el amparo de tu risa leve que es como un cantar,
ella aquieta me herida, todo todo se olvida.*
«El día que me quieras» Alfredo Le Pera and Carlos Gardel (1935)

At the end of a Cuban documentary, called «*Che Comandante, Amigo*,» (Bernabé Hernández, 1977), we see the following sequence of images: murals and posters with Che's image, crowds of exuberant young Cubans run toward the camera, and then a young boy, about five or so with flowing blonde locks, also runs toward the camera laughing, and then the final image: a painting of Che as Christ with a crown of thorns.¹ Such images, no matter how genuine the sense of loss, admiration, and gratitude, hurl Che Guevara out of time and history into the pure, eternal, fetishized realm of myth. This is, as Barthes has explained, a depoliticized speech, in which the sign, the image of Che, for example, is emptied of meaning and becomes available for any new meaning or use.² Today we can see Che's image on T-shirts, posters, billboards, and magazine ads, though few seem to know much about him. In New York City recently, I saw the familiar red-hued graphic Che poster in a shop: The beret, the flowing black hair, the up-turned eyes. The face, however, was not Che's, but the simian visage of a The Planet of the Apes character.

Into this fluid and contradictory context comes *El día que me quieras* (*The Day You Love Me*, 1998), a 30-minute non-narrative film by the Argentine poet and visual artist, Leandro Katz, who has lived and taught in the United States since 1965. Fascinated by the famous photograph of Che's body, laid out in the crude laundry room of the village hospital in Vallegrande, Bolivia, near where he was wounded in battle, captured, briefly held, and summarily murdered, Katz went to Bolivia to interview the photographer, Freddy Alborta.

He wanted to understand the power of this image which, in 1967, proclaimed and proved Che's death to the world. In his film, Katz creates a real sense of loss and mourning, but one that counters the mythologizing of Che by first deconstructing this image and then by placing Che back into the Latin American intellectual life of his day through a series of cultural references to Borges, Gardel, Nemda, Castro, and current Andean culture.

THE IMAGE

In one important thread of the film, Katz interviews Freddy Alborta and draws out the circumstances of this photograph. Who is Alborta? How did he come to take the photo? What happened on that day? What were his feelings and impressions? Did he know the paintings to which John Berger has compared the photo? He didn't, but he was very aware that this was not simple photojournalism. He worked very carefully, knowing that he was in the presence of an already legendary figure, a Christ figure even, and that such a moment comes once in a lifetime. Breaking the interview format, Katz's camera watches Alborta develop the photo in his lab. We see the image appear in the developer; Alborta takes it out and shows it to us. Like a police investigator, Katz draws out all the circumstances of the photo's making, puts it into a powerful material context. Like history itself, the photo was a piece of work. There is little mysterious about it—except the quality of the artist's eye and what viewers bring to it.

At the same time, Katz deconstructs this photograph itself, using his own camera to crop it, isolate details, reveal less obvious aspects, juxtapose several images of the event, explain the context. Using Alborta's many images of that day, Katz moves from the main image, the one that circled the globe, to other images, building up a visual sense of the whole scene. He also uses brief clips from some newsreel footage taken that day. And the scene is indeed that of a «charnel house,» as Jeffery Skoller so eloquently puts it.³ The blood soaked bodies of two other guerrillas lie disregarded and uncovered on the floor. We see that several onlookers cover their noses with handkerchiefs and can imagine the smell of the dirt, the blood, the decaying bodies—all the agony this room embodies. Experienced in this fuller way, the scene reminds us of the soccer stadium, the police academies, the clandestine army prisons, the isolated concentration camps where tens of thousands of Latin Americans, activists and innocents alike,

experienced dreadful tortures and a lonely death alone amongst inhuman strangers. Here by visual means Katz once again imbeds Che's body in history, countering any effort to mythologize it.

CULTURAL REFERENCES

Cultural references constitute the other important thread running through this film. On the visual track we see a variety of images from present-day Bolivia. These images might seem to document village life, but much more so they illustrate a brief parable Katz reads in voice over. The text comes from Jorge Luis Borges's «The Witness,» found in his collection, *Labyrinths* (1962). The parable reflects on the fact that when one dies, all memory, all that the person saw in life, all that he or she witnessed dies as well. At first the one-page parable imagines the things a humble pre-Christian Saxon peasant might have seen, especially pagan rituals. Toward the end Borges comes to talk about the «pathetic or frail» forms that will be lost when he dies. Katz slightly rewrites the story to center it in a person living at the time of the conquest who witnessed both Andean rituals, now mostly, but not entirely lost, and colonial ones. In his reading, Katz poeticizes the parable by repeating lines and phrases and not moving linearly through it. The key description, repeated several times, seems written for this situation. «In a stable almost in the shadow of an old stone church a man with black eyes and a dark beard, lying amidst the odour of animals, humbly seeks death, as one would seek sleep.»

Further on he imagines the «infinite number of things» that die «in every final agony.» Che is gone. We have his writing, documentary evidence of his activities, films and photographs, testimony of friends and associates as well as enemies. But there is also much that Che could have told us and never will, things he saw and experienced that we will never know about. This richly suggestive idea moves off in two directions of great political importance to Latin America and the left in general. Che is dead. To begin with, emphasizing this, as Katz does, counters efforts to mythologize him. We can learn from his example and his ideas. His life can inspire us, but he is dead and we must live on and find our own way to change the world. John Berger, writing at the time the photograph first appeared, responded in this way to the image even then: «It is an image which, as much as any mute image ever can, calls for decision.»⁴ At the same time, there has been so much death in Latin America—death squads, disappearances, summary executions, assassinations, warfare, Coups, revolutions and counter revolutions—and, in most cases, what actually happened and who did it and what happened to the bodies remain a mystery. So much has been witnessed and so little is known.

We also hear Fidel Castro reading Che's final letter to him and to the Cuban people. In the letter Che talks about his love and admiration for the Cuban people, now his people, and for his brother-in-arms, Fidel Castro, but also concludes that it is time for him to move on, to carry the revolution out into the rest of the Third World. This begins early in the film, trails off and then returns at the end, as if perhaps it subtended the whole film, was always there as a subterranean part of the film's works, an extended farewell. Whereas Borges reminds us of Che's origins in Argentina, Che's letter to Fidel reminds us of his important role in the Cuban Revolution.

Early in the film we hear brief strains of Tango strings. This music then returns only at the end of the film over the Che smiling, vibrant image of Che just after the successful battle of Santa Clara (Cuba). Katz presents a complex overlay of sound and image here, connecting Che back to Argentina through Gardel's singing and to Cuba with the image. Primarily, though, Katz brings Che back to life and bathes him in love and joy. The loving look, the gaze of the other (in this case the camera's eye), as the song goes, relieves all life's wounds and everything is forgotten. Finally a young Bolivian girl offers a bouquet of roses. We might say that here at the end of the film Katz provides the farewell, the funereal moment Che never received in 1967 from his enemies. Che Guevara, like his fellow Argentine Gardel, went abroad to make a name for himself and died before he could return—again the elegiac sense of loss and displacement which suffuses the film.

Katz imagines that on death one might lose, amongst other things, the «echo of the voice of Neruda,» the Chilean poet and political activist. On the sound track we hear him reading from «No Hay Olvido,» a poem from the Second Series (1931-35) of *Residence on Earth*. Here too is the sense of loss and mourning, but in this case the desire to forget the terrible things one has seen: «So many things I want to forget.» All these cultural figures that Katz references here are dead: Che who wrote the letter to Fidel, Borges, Gardel, and Neruda. But the film contains one other cultural reference that remains very alive.

The soundtrack contains Andean drum and pan pipe music and we see villagers perform music and various other cultural acts, particularly a colorful procession in which many of the men wear colorful masks. The Bolivian villagers have enacted other gestures that appear in the film as isolated images: a man opening a drawer and taking out a 1967 diary, another carrying a coffin down the street, two

peasants herding sheep toward the camera. We also see several peasants carrying large red banners and finally dozens walk side by side across a field holding a long red banner aloft.

All of these images are keyed to and illustrate moments, images really, in the Borges story. Jeffery Skoller, however, finds these scenes unconvincing. He argues that the peasants «seem to stand in homage to Guevara, but their anonymity creates a childlike purity in their activity , as if in their innocence they-like nature-stand outside of time.»⁵ I see these images more in the context of the Borges story as rewritten by Katz. In the parable Borges imagines that when the man dies, «with him will die, and never return, the last immediate images of these pagan rites. ...»⁶ Katz talks instead of a «procession of crude idols burdened with colonial gold.» The carrying of red banners is a more modern ritual, designed, as the others, to create and maintain a group sensibility , even spirituality



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CONCLUSION: MYTH AND HISTORY

By carefully drawing out and examining the very material aspects of this famous photograph and placing Che in a temporal pan- Latin American intellectual context, Leandro Katz opens up the full horror of Che's death and disappearance, as one example among many. We might say that these contexts reabsorb Che, emptying the image of its mythic, quasi-religious charge, collapsing it and returning him to history .-This, of course has been the traditional role of realism in art. Regarding 19th century realist painters, Linda Nochlin writes: «They attempted to grasp and convey in their works the mundane truth of dying-the bare truth, stripped of all transcendental meanings and metaphysical implications, but rich in the circumstantiality of psychological, physical and social detail.»⁷ Katz has embodied his realism in a quite stylized and avant-garde cinematic form rather than in that of the traditional documentary .Both by analyzing images themselves and including his own voice and body (in the conversation with Alborta), Katz creates a self-reflexive work that seems to echo Bill Nichols's search for a political cinema.

Reflexivity opens up possibilities for the representation of the body that fracture more conventional approaches. Reflexivity helps move the viewer outside those systems of sympathy, charity,

martyrdom, and victimization that limit the apprehension of magnitude to a secure and unthreatening set of protocols for 'reaching out.' Reflexive strategies challenge the predestination of victims and disasters, and place inside the text the formal means for an experiential awareness of excess, of that which exceeds the frame, including social praxis itself.⁸

By bathing this heretofore mythically charged image in the bright light of historical and material reality, Katz has sealed off metaphysical responses and interpretations. He wants us to respond intensely to the simple fact of this man's lonely final agony and turn our attention to the political reality surrounding it. Thus he ends the film with a quote, expressing his own anger and outrage at the manner of this death, from *The Great Rebel*, by Luis J. Gonzalez and Gustavo Sánchez Salazar: Shot, executed, murdered, or finished off-whatever particular interpretation one gives to the facts-there is a human truth which rises above any subjectivism: a man, a sick and wounded prisoner, was killed without any semblance of justice when he was in the hands of those whose duty it was to rigorously guard his physical safety. Beyond any moral law and above any legal principles, the truth is that an elementary rule of war had been violated.⁹

The rules have been violated in Latin America-over and over again the forces of reaction have viciously violated the bodies of the people they have captured and arrested. It continues today in sweatshops and prisons and torture centers, as transnational capital's neoliberal policies are forced down people's throats. To feel something for Ernesto «Che» Guevara, as an individual, we need to know something about him, understand who he was, what he did and what he was trying to do. But the man before us, seen as an ordinary human being, abused, neglected, put on display, and subsequently disappeared can evoke a subjective feeling of empathy and even outrage. Leandro Katz counters the many myths of Che (villain or hero) with the historical reality of his brutal death. Myth, as Barthes says, depends on purifying, making clear, making innocent. Katz works in the opposite direction. He muddies the waters, questions, refuses innocence, and deconstructs, reminding us constantly that we participate in messy historical processes, ones that involve great danger and always lead, ultimately, to our final agony and the obliteration of what we saw and remember. We each bid farewell. We each witness things we want to forget. And we all look forward to the day when the object of our desire returns our love. Che Guevara no less than anyone else.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) This film and many others from Latin America are available in the U.S. from the Latin American Video Archive, 124 Washington Place, NY, NY, 10014. (212)-263-0108. Email: imre@igc.apc.org. Website: www.lavavideo.org. *El Día que me quieras* is available internationally from Lane Balfour Films, London (Phone (+44) (0)171 2675392 and Fax (+44) (0)1712674241) and in the U.S. from leandrok@interport.net (Fax: (212) 260-4254).
- (2) BARTHES, R. «Myth today,» *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972: 109-159.
- (3) SKOLLER, J. «The Future's past: Re-Imaging the Cuban Revolution,» *Afterimage*, Vol. 26, No.5 (March-April, 1999): 14.
- (4) BERGER, J. «Che Guevara Dead,» *Aperture*, Vol.13, No.4 (1968): 38.
- (5) *Ibid.*
- (6) BORGES, J. L. *Labyrinths*, ed. and trans., Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. New York: Modern Library, 1983: 243.
- (7) NOCHLIN, L. *Realism*. New York; Penguin Books, 1971: 60.
- (8) NICHOLS, B. *Representing Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991: 243.
- (9) GONZALEZ, L.J. and Gustavo Sánchez Salazar, *The Great Rebel*. New York: Grove Press, 1969. Katz wrote me about this book saying: " These were the first Bolivian journalists to conduct an intensive investigation on Che's death. *The Great Rebel* has never been published in its original language mainly because of the political climate that followed.»

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