

The Image and Substance of Che

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Gavin Turk *God Save Che Guevara* 2005

At the end of the *Motorcycle Diaries*, Che Guevara recounts meeting a mysterious stranger who persuades him of the justice of the revolution, and utters this prophecy about the young man's future:

I also know ... that you will die with your fist clenched and your jaw tense, the perfect manifestation of hatred and struggle, because you aren't a symbol (some inanimate example), you are an authentic member of the society to be destroyed; the spirit of the beehive speaks through your mouth and moves through your actions.¹

Yet, for most in the West at least, the passing years have smoothed away memories of hatred and struggle, of Che's ruthlessness and utter dedication to the cause, so that his image (and almost always the same image, based on the famous photograph by Alberto Korda) has indeed become a symbol. That image has been tussled over by corporations,

¹ Ernesto Che Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey Around South America*, trans. Ann Wright, Verso, London 1995, p. 152.

stolen by a vodka company, successfully defended from such misuse in the courts, and even gestured towards by the Church of England in an absurd attempt to re-brand Christ—and by implication its wittering vicars—as macho rebels. The process is familiar, of course, from the brief reign of corporate Soviet chic that promptly followed the fall of the Eastern Bloc, a rapid colonisation of newly opened cultural territory. Yet the skirmishes over Che persist and continue to intensify.

This is partly because contained within the image of Che there are two opposed and salient legacies: of political radicalism, collective action, the heroism of revolution and anti-colonial struggle; but also of the radical individualism of the 1960s, of unconventional lifestyles and charismatic youth. In that single frame, two notions of rebellion and freedom compete, one centred upon the elimination of oppression, the other on the positive freedom of individuals to live as they want. They are two halves of a once unified vision in which the success of the first would permit the realisation of the second. As it turned out, of course, the first failed while the second has been successful only in liberating the wealthy. In Che's image signs of both are condensed: the steadfast revolutionary and the smouldering, impetuous youth, the one adding a tinge of half-forgotten danger to the other.



Such a pointed combination made Che a natural subject for Gavin Turk whose previous work has played sophisticated games with celebrity. Turk has spliced his own features into Che's image, in black-on-red hoardings and in a waxwork mock-up of the picture taken to prove that the revolutionary was dead (though here Che lies alone, unmolested by the Bolivian soldiers that surround him in the photograph). In January, in an

ambitious departure from this previous line of work, Turk staged a series of meetings and discussion sessions about Che's life and legacy in a squatted room in Shoreditch. Political strategy meetings were followed by sessions in which activists would organise some form of demonstration in which the series would culminate. The idea of *The Che Guevara Story*, says Turk, was to use his status as a newsworthy artist to set up a space for discussion and action that would have a chance of breaking into the mass media.

The project did receive press coverage: in the *Guardian*, for instance (home to some of Britain's most conservative and self-indulgent critics), Jonathan Jones wrote a piece which claimed that Che was only ever an image: that he never did or wrote anything of substance, and that it was only the accident of his good looks that have sustained his fame. Naturally, then, Turk's project could only be an ironic glance at this empty celebrity.² These assertions, a telling indication of liberal amnesia, were extraordinarily foolish and ill-informed: Che played a very important role in a successful revolution; his singular dedication to social justice inspired devotion among many in his lifetime; his writings contain a mix of idealist passion and hard analysis sadly lacking in the vast majority of art criticism. Nevertheless, Jones' response was instructive for he said what conservatives must say about Che, once the spectre of his deeds is raised in combination with (rather than being blotted out by) that seductive image, as was threatened in Turk's event.

It is because Che's words and deeds were in congruence that his memory has not faded. In Latin America, Che's image is still lively, and not merely as a fashion statement or for commercial exploitation. In Cuba, of course, it is still often seen and has overt political meaning. Depictions of Che are seen far more than that of Castro, though far less than that of José Martí. There the image is a political symbol, to be sure (and depending on your sympathies, is reviled or revered) but it is also more than that since Che's achievements and limits are still incarnated in the nation's very fabric.

In the towns of Chiapas and the encampments of the Zapatista rebels, Che often appears in banners and murals. The use of his image here is more complex, since the Zapatistas have built their movement in reaction against Guevara's ideas, repudiating that legacy of elite, authoritarian guerrilla warfare in favour of a radically democratic movement that uses warfare or the media as the situation demands and its people instruct. As this is written, the Zapatistas, and their spokesperson, Subcommandante Marcos, take the perilous journey to Mexico City to negotiate the rights of indigenous people with the new government. For the Zapatistas, Che is honoured as an exemplary revolutionary, as all the many generations of dead rebels are honoured as present, a ghostly army that marches with the militarily weak bands of the present.

Che sometimes identified with Don Quixote in his writings, and used the book in literacy classes for his peasant recruits. In one of the last letters he was to write, to his father, he begins: 'Amid the dust kicked up by the heels of Rocinante, with my lance at the ready to do battle with enemy giants, I send you this brief note.'³ Cervantes' knight sometimes appears in demonstrations supporting the Zapatistas. Marcos draws on *Don Quixote* to dramatise the predicament of the revolutionary band, and the awesome opposition it

² Jonathan Jones, 'Glad to be Che', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2001.

³ Ernesto Che Guevara, *Bolivian Diary*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters, Pathfinder, New York 1994, p. 316.

must face.⁴ This first modern novel was born alongside capitalism and the genocidal exploitation of the Americas that was its labour. As Lionel Trilling put it, ‘the poverty of the Don suggests that the novel is born with the appearance of money as a social element—money, the great solvent of the solid fabric of the old society, the great generator of illusion.’⁵ Four hundred years later, the Zapatistas resist the dominance of that same corrosive force.

So if Che is still a living and substantial presence, what was Turk trying to achieve with his fortnight-long programme of discussions and events, played out among the literature by and about Che? It seemed quite different from the works in which Turk appropriated and exploited Che’s image to make art objects, though the allure of the guerrilla was still in use. The mismatch between Latin American revolutionary politics and the glittering banalities of ‘young British art’ was part of the point; to fix, says Turk, on what shines out of history into the present. If the left’s struggles, until recently appearing antique, have begun to shine anew, it is because prospects are emerging for radical political action that condenses single-issue concerns to bring about opposition to the system of world capitalism as a whole. These movements are marked out by new ways of thinking about how political and cultural action can work in synthesis. They embody just that dangerous compact of cultural and political radicalism of which Che’s image is a reminder, and that conservatives must seek to deny by occluding one or the other.

Turk’s project was itself Quixotic. You cannot get a few diverse folk together over the course of a fortnight and conjure a political programme out of the air. The discussion I attended had many points of interest but felt aimless and unfocused, and everyone I spoke to who had attended other sessions felt similarly. Bizarrely, the final manifestation was dominated by nudists arguing for their rights to go naked in public. Yet that Quixotic character is what links Che and those contemporary artists who try to take a critical stand to one side of corporate culture, and who in doing so can appear as heroically crazy as the doleful, latter-day knight. Eduardo Galeano, who has written so eloquently of the cruel oppression and resistance of Latin American history, puts the matter succinctly:

She’s on the horizon. ...I go two steps closer, she moves two steps away. I walk ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps ahead. No matter how much I walk, I’ll never reach her. What good is utopia? That’s what: it’s good for walking.⁶

⁴ See especially the Zapatista communiqué, ‘Seven Questions for Whom it May Concern (Images of neoliberalism in the Mexico of 1997’, and Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, *Conversations with Durito*, Austin, Texas, Pirate Press 1996.

⁵ Trilling, ‘Manners, Morals and the Novel’, in *The Liberal Imagination*, 1950.

⁶ Eduardo Galeano, *Walking Words*, trans. Mark Fried, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1995, p. 326.