Rewriting Revolutionary Myths:
Photography in Castro’s Cuba and Tania Bruguera’s

*Tatlin’s Whisper#6*

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**Abstract:** Photography was a key medium for creating, spreading, and cementing myths about the Cuban Revolution and its leaders. In the first part of this essay, I’ll explore several iconic images as well as responses to these pictures, all parts of a Cuban “cross-national memory discourse” (Cf. Quiroga, 2005). Walter Benjamin’s media philosophy can help in developing insights about the functioning of these photographs. In the second part of the paper, I turn to Tania Bruguera’s piece *Tatlin’s Whisper#6* (staged at the 10th Havana Biennial in 2009), which radically rewrites the poetics of the images and aspires to create a sense of participation and direct involvement.

**Keywords:** Photography, Memory Mediation, Diaspora, Performance Art, Walter Benjamin

**Introduction**

In her novel *Days of Awe* (2001), Cuban-American novelist Achy Obejas reproduces the following story about Fidel Castro’s victory speech on the 8th of January 1959: “On both sides of the Straits of Florida there’s a story about Fidel’s first victory speech in Havana. Sometime shortly after he began, a white dove perched on his left shoulder, leaving everyone breathless. This is Fidel’s voodoo: He does the impossible. He gets that bird to pose with him, whether through strategy or sorcery it doesn’t matter. In one case, it’s divine intervention; in the other, a stroke of theatrical genius; in both, he wins.” (Obejas, 2001, p. 127)

Obejas’s novel reiterates and simultaneously rewrites a myth about Castro that has entered the collective memory of revolutionary Cuba and its
diaspora. The comment on the wide distribution of the story about Castro and the dove sustains an observation José Quiroga makes, in *Cuban Palimpsests*, about the geographical dispersal of Cuba’s collective memory: “Cuba belongs to what Andreas Huyssen has called an ‘expanded field’, which involves a ‘cross-national memory discourse’ situated between the global and the local and not simply within a geographic boundary” (Quiroga, 2005, p. 2). In this paper, I work with the idea that a form of cultural memory that is not limited by national borders is a particularly fertile ground for creative rewritings and transformations. Obejas’s reproduction of the story, for instance, contributes to its longevity; but her protagonist’s attitude oscillates between awe and sceptical analysis, therefore, the repetition of the myth is tainted by the voice of someone who does not fully believe in the uniqueness of the event. Castro’s inexplicable ability at creating unforgettable moments is alternatively explained as “sorcery” or “strategy”.

The moment Obejas’s narrator recollects is the focus of this paper. On the one hand, I am interested in the way in which the myth entered the collective memory of Cubans spread around the globe, while, on the other hand, I look into attempts at transforming and rewriting this narrative. Another aspect that will be discussed is the importance of mediation. Obejas’s readers easily get the impression that the story about Castro and the dove is myth mainly kept alive through the narratives that were formed about the event. But instead Castro’s magic in this moment formed an alliance with another sort of magic: the magic of mechanical reproduction.

![Fig. 1 Castro’s victory speech, photography by Alberto Korda (1959)](image-url)
“Contemplation” and “Tactile Appropriation”: Two Modes of Responding to Visual Art

Ernesto Hernández Busto, in his article “Revolución: fotos fijas” (2009) reflects on photographs by Alberto Korda and José Pepe Agraz that allow us to retrospectively witness the scenario of Castro’s victory speech with the following words: Las fotos más emblemáticas de la Revolución cubana no son exactamente ‘documentales’: acarrean elevados niveles de idealización y estetización, es decir, todo lo contrario de la objetividad histórica”.¹ Busto also points out how quickly the symbolic function of the dove entered public discourse: “Se habló de la Paz [...] y del Espíritu Santo. También de rituales de santería, donde la paloma blanca sería símbolo de Obatalá, el Elegido, el hijo de Dios”.² In the perception of the scene, Castro’s dove turns into a symbol of divine intervention, and, if we believe Busto’s representation of the story, the photographs seem to cement the perception of Castro as a messiah rather than a propaganda magician.

Photography as a medium, particularly in the decades of its invention, was certainly associated with the miraculous as much as with the possibility of creating authentic records of reality. In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin, however, seeks to emancipate the photographic image from other traditions of visual representation. Benjamin particularly opposes the kind of control works of art appear to exert over the viewer, who is caught in a posture of passive contemplation, with photographic versatility. Benjamin notes that the “unique existence” of works of art depends on their “presence in time and space” (1999, p. 214). This “presence” is what photographic reproductions lack. Namely, photographs liberate their objects from specific spatial-temporal coordinates as they allow for a sort of “dispersal” and simultaneously a new and political approach to reality that is no longer defined by contemplation but instead by “tactile appropriation” (1999, p. 233). Reproduction, in this philosophy, signifies transformation and participation.

Busto’s comments, however, show how the photographs taken of Castro with the white dove perched on his shoulder did not shatter the myth but instead enhanced its potential to control minds and memories. Rather than achieving the functioning Benjamin envisions for photography, these pictures aim at the response associated with traditional works of art: the viewer is supposed to take in the scene with awe and remain in a position of passive spectatorship.

In one of Korda’s photographs, Castro is presented as a detached figure: the photograph is taken from below, a perspective that signals a position of silent admiration, and its protagonist’s gaze is directed at an indeterminate point that lies somewhere beyond the margin of the picture. Castro clutches the microphone, like a trophy; his body is framed by three white doves. The composition endows the young revolutionary leader with a sort of presence that easily inspires respect.

The preceding discussion – particularly Obejas’s and Busto’s responses to myths about Castro’s victory speech and the photographs that make up a part of it – however show that these images, while certainly powerful, lack the strength to resist transformations within the Cuban “cross-national memory discourse” (cf. Quiroga, 2005). Obejas writes from Chicago and Busto from Barcelona: both are participants in the...
creation of Cuban cultural memory and both rephrase the myth of Castro and the dove. Obejas replaces the version that paints Castro as a messiah by a vocabulary of “voodoo”, “sorcery”, and “strategy”, and Busto displays a critical attitude that matches these suggestions. The following paragraphs are dedicated to a third approach to the myth and its pictures.

“TACTILE APPROPRIATION” AND “RETAIATION”: TANIA BRUGUERA’S TATLIN’S WHISPER#6

The Castro-photographs discussed here provide the point of departure for Cuban artist Tania Bruguera’s piece of behavior art Tatlin’s Whisper#6. The performance was staged at the Centro Wilfredo Lam during the 10th Havana Biennial in 2009, as part of the project of another artist, Mexican-born Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s Corpo Ilícito. The piece thus entered the Biennial through the backdoor, not as a part of the official script but rather as the result of cultural networking that transcends national borders.

Tatlin’s Whisper#6 reiterates the scenario with Castro and the dove, with the crucial difference that the leading parts, those of the speaker and his photographers, are played by Cuban visitors of the Biennial. During the performance in 2009, volunteers from the audience were invited to enter a stage where they were endowed with a microphone and a white dove to perch on their shoulder. Then they were given a minute each to express their opinions freely. At the same time, disposable cameras were distributed among the audience, so that visitors could take pictures of the event. Bruguera’s piece illustrates that the iconic photographs of Castro make up a part of collective memories and mythologies in Cuba, but the performance also juxtaposes the evocation of these well-known pictures with voices usually unheard. In The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon uses the word “retaliation” (1990, p. 41) in order to describe the manner in which postmodern photography emancipates photographs from the ideologies they are inscribed with. The expression seems to fit into this context: Bruguera’s staging interrogates the privileged position of public figures and jeopardizes the posture of silent contemplation that those who look at Castro’s photographs are susceptible to.

Bruguera’s preference for the expression “behavior art” over the label “performance” is interesting in this context. In a 2003-speech titled “Arte de Conducta”, the artist clarifies the scope of the concept: “Power works with metaphors, while it is in behavior where society does its most fervent work of modeling meanings”. The opportunity for visitors of the Biennial to occupy the position of a public speaker or to create
their own documents of remembrance of an event exceeds a mere subversion of the propaganda apparatus and its mythologies. Instead, it aims at affecting transformation through direct engagement and a sense of participation in history. These ideas appear to echo Benjamin’s essay and his belief in photography’s potential, to slowly transform social realities through a mode of perception that relies on tactile involvement: “For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.” (1999, p. 233) Tatlin’s Whisper #6 thus restores photography’s capacity of reaching out to the public and inspiring a sense of vicinity. It turns the visitors of the Biennial into agents entitled to create memories of which they are the protagonists.

**Dissemination: Photographs in New Spheres of Perception**

A noteworthy aspect of Bruguera’s piece is that the first speaker who entered the stage in order to emulate Castro’s famous performance was Yoani Sánchez. Sánchez is one of Cuba’s most notorious blogger personalities and her online project Generación Y finds international recognition. Bruguera’s piece assumes new meaning through Sánchez’s participation, as the Cuban blogger community disseminated information about Tatlin’s Whisper #6 on the Internet, thus, helping the piece enter a new sphere of existence, detached from the original staging. Photographs that document Tatlin’s Whisper #6 were made available to an international audience, not only on Bruguera’s own homepage but also on sites that allow direct engagement and commentary. These images participate in social structures that transcend Cuba’s national boundaries and contribute to the continued existence and growth of the “cross-national memory discourse”, and its potential for creative transformations.

**Endnotes**

[1] “The most emblematic pictures of the Revolution are not precisely ‘documentary’: they combine diverse levels of idealization and aesthetics, one might say, the complete opposite of historiographic objectivity” (my translation).
[2] “Peace and the Holy Spirit were mentioned. Also certain santería rituals, in which a white dove would be the symbol of Obtalá, the chosen one, the son of God” (my translation).

**References**