

Comments and Reports

I

Havana Diary: Cuba's Blue Period

W. J. T. Mitchell

At Miami International Airport, as you check in for the daily charter flights to Cuba, an energetic young man charges seven dollars per bag to wrap all your suitcases in sheets of vivid blue shrink-wrap. On arrival in Havana, the bags come off the conveyor belt as a stream of anonymous blue cocoonlike objects. Difficult enough to identify in their usual hues, your bags, vague, generic shapes hidden beneath layers of plastic, become almost impossible to pick out. What is the purpose of this enormous effort and expenditure on miles of nonbiodegradable winding sheet around the luggage transported from Miami to Havana? "It is because the Cubans at Havana airport, seeing that they come from Miami, will open the suitcases and steal from them," we are assured by an American ticket agent in Miami. When I ask the same question in Havana, I am told that "it is because the Cubans at Miami airport, seeing that they are destined for Cuba, will open the suitcases and steal from them."

As a naive American citizen on my first visit to Cuba, wrapped in a lifetime of legends, lies, rumors, and propaganda about our neighbor to the south, I am not certain whom to believe. Even worse, I am not sure that it matters very much. If it turns out that the poor Cubans in Havana are stealing from the rich visitors to their country, will that be so surprising? And if it turns out that the relatively better-off Cubans in Miami are stealing to deter travel to Cuba, will that be a shock to anyone? All I care about at this point is finding my own bags amidst the tangled chaos of amorphous blue and getting out of this airport.

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An American who returns from a visit to Cuba these days is expected to have become an instant authority on the country and to answer all sorts of predictable questions. What is the mood? What will happen when Fidel dies? Will there at last be free elections? A free, uncensored press? Will Cuba's position as the last holdout of communism collapse under a tsunami of credit cards and free trade? Will the Cuban exile community return in triumph to restore the old neocolonial regime of Batista? How will Cuba catch up with the rest of Latin America, which long ago succumbed to the sirens of capitalism? Will it go the way of other authoritarian communist regimes like the Soviet Union and China and turn itself into an authoritarian capitalist regime? What is happening and what is going to happen in this island, and why should it be of interest to the U.S., to the Americas, and to the rest of the world?

Of course a week's visit to a country where I do not speak the native language does not exactly qualify me as an expert on that country. The only thing I can truthfully testify to is a mood that I sensed among the community of artists and intellectuals in Havana—young art students bristling with projects in a variety of media, scholars and editors and filmmakers. Thanks to an invitation from Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, I spent a week immersed in this world, 18–25 September 2007, giving seminars on the role of images in the U.S. “war on terror,” and relying on translators to communicate with most of the students. I also found myself immersed in the company and the elegant English of some of the leading intellectuals in Havana today, for whom language barriers are either nonexistent or merely the conditions for virtuosic conversation: Desiderio Navarro, editor of the journal *Criterio*, who hosted my seminars at the Centro Teórico-Cultural, speaks fifteen languages and counting, and is probably the world's most accomplished translator of European criticism and theory into Spanish; Roberto Fernández Retamar, the author of classic essays on the Caliban figure and Latin American culture and one of the principal inspirations for Edward Said's *Orientalism*; and Ambrosio Fornet, editor, writer, and filmmaker, currently writing on the Cuban diaspora, who attended two of the seminars and joined us for a wonderful, leisurely dinner at Bruguera's apartment in Habana Vieja.

I was also able, thanks to the connections of some colleagues who had accompanied me from the U.S., to arrange a meeting with Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the Cuban National Assembly and a man frequently

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mentioned at the time as a possible successor to Castro. Alarcón gave us a two-hour interview at his office at the beginning of our visit and then showed up for the final session of the seminars, much to the delight (or was it dismay?) of the students who were presenting their work that day. We spent our last night in Cuba having dinner with Alarcón, discussing every aspect of the current situation: economic, political, and cultural.

Since the announced topic of the lectures I had been invited to give in Havana was "Art, Images, and Activism," I had organized a small collective, Team Havana, as we called ourselves. This team consisted of two actually existing activists, Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn, former Weather People and longtime allies of the Cuban revolution; and one actually existing artist, my wife, composer and performance artist Janice Misurell Mitchell. I will spare you their CVs and say only that their presentations—Janice performing Allen Ginsberg's "Whom Bomb" and her own new piece "US"; Bill and Bernardine screening the Academy Award-nominated film *The Weather Underground*—provided the real electricity for our visit. The purpose of my lectures was to raise theoretical questions about the concepts underlying these practices—or in other words (some might say) to cool people down and keep actual politics from breaking out. This did not prevent me sweating blood over the lectures, which could not be read but had to be extemporized in that slow, stately pace demanded by sentence-by-sentence translation.

The following reflections, then, are a tangle of different threads, conversations mainly circulating around the question of images: the war of images that accompanies the so-called war on terror; the place of Cuba in the Axis of Evil; the self-image of Cubans at the present time, at home and across Latin America and the world; the "Two Cubas" and U.S. electoral politics; the image of the blockade and its relation to other notorious walls that are being erected to separate peoples all over the world; the American image of Cuba in Michael Moore's *Sicko*; the role of images in propaganda and in activist or (in Bruguera's phrase) "useful" art that provokes sustained reflection and critical debate.

As should be evident, it is difficult to raise questions about Cuba without begging them in advance. *The mood* may be impossible to specify. Cubans disagree even about the moods of relatively settled past periods. The so-called gray period of the five years after the disastrous sugar harvest of 1970 is now generally regarded as a "black period," which lasted more like fifteen years. The all-too-brief "golden age" of prosperity in the eighties gave way to the "special period," which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Cuba's economic reliance on Soviet aid. This colorless era of shortages has now tapered off into a period of mild, tentative im-

provement bolstered by the diversification of industry (mainly in biotechnology and medicine), an influx of Venezuelan petrodollars, and reinvestment from European countries in defiance of the U.S. blockade, especially from Spain's new liberal government. One hears occasional jokes about a new, unexpected outcome to the Spanish-American War in Cuba in which Spain emerges victorious after a century of lying in wait.

Everyone seems happy to talk about the problems, and candid self-criticism is being encouraged by the government. Cubans seem to agree that the media, along with public transportation and the right to free speech, could be a lot better. Vague rumors of censorship in the arts circulate freely, and there was a report on the day of my first lecture in Havana that the translator had cancelled because the police wanted a list of the names of everyone in attendance (this turned out to be groundless). If anyone had tried to stop the workshop, the students were prepared to document it with video cameras and treat it as material for a work of activist art.

When people are asked, then, about the color of the present in relation to the grays and blacks of the seventies, the golden moment of the eighties, and the revolutionary reds of the sixties, they are generally cautious. For-net, whose writing has been central to the acknowledgment that the gray period of the seventies was actually black, puts it this way: "The important thing is the color of the future, which will be determined by the Cuban people."

If I were forced to paint the mood of Cuba at the present time it would be in several shades of blue. Cubans have the blues partly because of an anticipated and ambivalent sense of mourning for the inevitable passing of Fidel. This is perhaps an inverted form of melancholy in that it is not about a failure to mourn and work through a loss but about a sense that one is already mourning prematurely, without a proper object, and thus experiencing a kind of emotional limbo. Many Cubans express a tired irritation when Yanquis ask their inevitable question about Fidel. One asked us why Americans can't "leave the poor guy alone to die in peace." What is the Fidel fetish really about? And how long will they have to put up with this in-between space?

But this is a limbo that Cubans know will come to an end in the near if unforeseeable future. It is thus a blue period in the sense of a slender opening on the horizon to the clear skies of new possibility. When Fidel passes, it will no longer be possible or necessary to *Blame It on Fidel*, as the title of a recent film expresses the matter. The Father of the Revolution will be dead and Cubans will have to learn how to keep their revolution alive or, better, how to make it anew. The U.S. will no longer have its symbolic

enemy around to justify its ferocious policies toward the Cuban people. The *barbudos*, the bearded revolutionary Calibans of Latin America, have already long since been replaced by the bearded Taliban of the Middle East, and communism has been displaced by so-called Islamic fundamentalism as the primary ideological threat, mythical or real. Fidel's death, then, while it will surely be the occasion for a spectacular display of mourning around the world, will have approached us in something more like the way we anticipate a birth, knowing that it will come without knowing what it will look like or the exact day and time. It will also signal the official beginning of a struggle that has already been going on for at least five years, to adapt Cuba's homegrown socialism to the incursions of capitalism. Retamar's summary of this process is exemplary: "We have to win, even against ourselves."

Meanwhile, what was going on in our discussions with the students? While Janice was off with the musicians, Bill, Bernardine, and I posed them a variety of questions. What media are utilized for artistic activism in Cuba? What are the varieties of artistic engagement with politics? How do images provoke action or induce passivity? What are the idols and fetishes of Cuban culture? Is there an emergent Cuban style in the arts, or is current work oriented toward international audiences and issues? There were also more specific questions about the self-image of Cuba and of the blockade, their image of (in José Martí's phrase) the Monster to the North, and their self-image as enemies of that monster or friends of a continent and a larger world that is now relatively indifferent if not hostile to the monster.

The response from the Cuban artists tended to be quiet and indirect. They chided us politely for our naivete about Moore's *Sicko*, which (they pointed out) presents a far too rosy picture of the Cuban health-care system, a system that is overstretched by Cuba's practice of sending thousands of doctors abroad on humanitarian (and profitable) missions. They questioned the efficacy of straightforward political applications of the arts that fail to distinguish themselves from journalism and propaganda. And they showed us work that subtly bypassed any notion of a ready-made *Cubanidad*, either revolutionary or traditional, in favor of a knowing cosmopolitanism. One artist presented photographic documentation of his stunning performances as a racial and sexual cross-dresser, showing him in very convincing drag as a mother with an infant, as a gay man, and as an Afro-Cuban stopped by the police for DWB (Driving While Black, the interpretation provided by his Yanqui interlocutors). Another artist organized a neighborhood in Havana to redesign its primary street corner as a brightly painted boat, the intersection of the streets serving as the prow. (Is

the iconography of the boatlift referenced in this work? Hard to say.) In another work entitled *Emigration*, the artist sent pieces of herself abroad, locks of hair to be photographed in their new settings and emailed back to the artist. (Are Cuban artists prevented from traveling abroad? Only to the U.S., which has been completely closed to them for the last two years.) Another piece consisted of taped interviews with ordinary Cubans on issues of the day, their voices dubbed over by a single speaker, reading from a transcript of their statements. (A sly recasting of the central democratic ideal of the *vox populi*? Or a community voice, different faces and ideas speaking as one?)

All the works we saw were united by a single formal imperative, the need to document the artistic process and the social realities it encounters. Technically savvy, humorous, and sophisticated, these artists did not need any lessons from us in techniques or creative processes. We were there as simply a different kind of material to be taken in, absorbed, and put to use. Our visit was, of course, relentlessly documented in video and sound recording, but I would be very hesitant to predict what will be made of it.

"We are so far apart that there are two Cubas—ours and the one you picture to yourselves." This statement, from Ricardo Alarcón's recent address to the Latin American Studies Association, is itself ambiguous in its voicing. Who is he addressing? Is he speaking for the Cuban people? Or quoting C. Wright Mills, whose "noble and generous voice" counseled that it was time to *Listen, Yankee*, in his book by that title on the Cuban revolution published in 1960?

Everything about Cuba seems to be double and doubly so in the present moment, a historical limbo between the twentieth-century era of violent, popular revolutions and a hazy future that seems to promise nothing but violence against populations, a global arena in which deeply unpopular and nihilistic terrorist organizations are confronted and even nurtured by a massive "war on terror" conducted by the equally nihilistic rulers of the Axis of Goodness. The U.S. government has, in addition to its ever-shifting cast of "good Arabs" and "bad Arabs," its "good Cubans" and "bad Cubans." And so the two Cubas persist, one centered in Havana, the other in Miami, ninety miles away. And in each of the two Cubas, as Fornet has shown, there is a further division between the die-hard exilic Cubans of Miami and beyond, dreaming of overthrowing Fidel and rolling back the clock to the good old days of colonialism, and the less visible and audible Cuban diaspora that also lives in Miami and beyond but dreams of return without conquest. When one watches Cubans returning at José Martí Airport (where the Miami-Havana route is serviced) one sees families rushing

toward each other with such passionate violence that they seem “in danger of hurting one another,” to quote Bruguera. This is the result of a so-called family-values administration that has devised a labyrinth of regulations to prevent Cuban families from reuniting.

There are also many doublenesses inside Cuba: between the older, revolutionary generation that is passing away and the younger generation that is moving into their places, for example. The former yearns to ignite a spark of revolutionary renewal—within limits. Fidel’s mantra, “Within the Revolution, everything. Outside the Revolution, nothing,” is still recited. But what does it mean? Accelerating the activist tendencies of grassroots participatory democracy, as called for in a July 2007 speech by Raúl Castro? Or risking the fortunes of an electoral, multiparty politics manipulated by foreign capital? We heard that there are continuing divisions of the races and sexes, with higher poverty rates among Afro-Cubans, but what we *saw* (in sharp contrast to the continued racial segregation of the U.S.) was a remarkable degree of mixing and collaboration among the races. We heard about but did not see the economic divide between the cities and the countryside, and it turns out that there is a Cuban East–West division that uncannily replicates the central conflicted landscape in the Middle East. A recent issue of *La Gaceta de Cuba* includes an article by Jorge Fornet on the eastern Cubans as “Palestinos,” an Orientalist fantasy of “barbudos y campesinos” (the bearded country folk) invading Havana. But this hallucination drawn “from right field,” as Fornet puts it, is hardly stranger than the all-too-real nightmare of the easternmost province of Cuba, home to Guantánamo, the colonial prison where the Taliban takes the place of Caliban.

“And what is Cuba,” we were asked, “to the average American citizen?” “Almost nothing,” I answered (to a chorus of disagreement from my comrades). “Cuba now is a footnote to our long list of enemies.” But isn’t it just the reverse? Isn’t Cuba almost *everything* when its role in the balance of power is registered in contemporary U.S. electoral politics? Florida has played the crucial role in the last two American presidential elections, largely because of the Cuban exiles in Miami, who insist on the continuation of the blockade against Cuba as a condition of their support and participate in a clandestine war of terror and subversion in collaboration with the U.S. government.

The predominant attitude of U.S. citizens towards Cuba, however, seems to be one of blithe ignorance and indifference, coupled with a blasé acceptance that of course Cubans suffer under a dictatorship and are therefore enemies, part of the Axis of Evil. Art historian Adelaida de Juan told us of two questions that Cubans have to answer in order to immigrate into the U.S.: “Do you have a communicable disease? And do you intend to

assassinate the president of the United States?" Bill Ayers proposed that the right answer to the second question is: "I have much bigger plans than that." And of course someone immediately proposed that the best way to answer both questions at once is to say, "I have a fatal communicable disease that I would like to give to the president."¹

In the U.S., aside from the icons of revolution, Fidel and Che, and the smug assurance that the Cuban revolution will die out like every other socialist experiment of the twentieth century, little is really known about this small island country. A T-shirt in Canada bears the picture of Che Guevara with the legend, "I have no idea who this man is." According to historian Geraldine Lievesley, the Cuban revolution is now widely regarded as a dinosaur that will become extinct when Fidel dies.

We live in a strange period, however, when dinosaurs (literally "terror lizards") are coming back to life, seemingly out of the blue. Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* was set on a Caribbean island off Costa Rica, a site chosen because of its freedom from environmental regulations. If neoconservatism's militant war on terror has the effect of cloning terror all over the world, neoliberalism's rapacious economics of Third World wealth extraction has the effect of bringing terror to life in the suffering existence of millions of ordinary people.

But socialism is coming back to life in new, relatively nonviolent formations all over Latin America, combining capital flows with major investments in education, health, and social welfare. Alarcón remarked that he "had never dreamed that a country could accumulate enough wealth to buy socialism," the possible meaning of the Venezuelan and Bolivian models. He believes that Cuba has never enjoyed better relations with Latin America than it does today, and Latin America has never seemed more independent-minded toward the U.S. Today "Sarkozy has more of a role than Bush in Latin America," and the president of China visits America's "global South" before setting foot in the U.S. It is now Latin American countries who take the lead in resolving issues like the civil war in Colombia. And there is a newly defiant tone toward the Monster to the North; it is not just the usual Cuban impudence (Fidel offering to send election observers to Florida to certify that U.S. elections meet with international standards and medical workers to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina). President Rafael Correa of Ecuador responded to the U.S. request for a military base in Ecuador with a request for an Ecuadorean military base in Miami. On the night of our return to Chicago, Evo Mo-

1. A search of U.S. immigration documents failed to come up with these double questions, at least in this precise form.

rales, the president of Bolivia, appeared on Jon Stewart to explain why he has nationalized major industries formerly owned by multinational corporations, with staggering economic benefits for his people. And the Latin American Studies Association moved its annual meeting to Montréal in solidarity with the Cubans, who have been denied entry permits to attend the conference in the U.S. The keynote speaker was Alarcón; perhaps next year Fidel, if the blue period continues.

Finally, a bit of tourism (for which we had almost no time) among the sights and sounds of Havana. Do you “Remember the *Maine*”? This was the slogan that launched the first American invasion of Cuba in 1898 after the mysterious explosion that sank the U.S. warship by that name in Havana harbor. The so-called Spanish-American War (so-called because it erases Cuba from the equation) was short-lived, but the Cuban-American War might now be called the Hundred Years War. For the first fifty years it was conducted by proxy, employing colonial puppet governments who transferred wealth from Cuba to the U.S., turning it into the brothel of the Americas and a free-enterprise zone for American corporations, especially the mafia. Meyer Lansky’s picture still hangs in the lobby of the Hotel Nacional, across the street from the *casa particular* where we stayed, and memorable scenes from Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather II* seem to hover in the air. “Michael, we’re bigger than U.S. Steel,” exults Hyman Roth (aka Lansky) as he celebrates his impending business deal with Michael Corleone at a meeting in Havana.

But Michael is a shrewd observer and cautious businessman. He watches intently as a Cuban guerilla blows himself up while being arrested by Batista’s police and concludes that if the insurgents are willing to sacrifice themselves this way they could win this war. And of course they do. Or, more precisely, they launch the second fifty years of the Hundred Years War, when it becomes the properly Cuban-American War, a war conducted by espionage, terrorism, sponsored insurgencies, invasion, and an economic blockade designed to starve the Cuban people into submission. One response of the Cubans has been to send a few agents to Miami to infiltrate the Cuban exile community and to attempt to report on the plans and locations of terrorists to the U.S. government. The reward of the Cuban Five’s antiterrorist activities has been, predictably, to be labeled as terrorists themselves and to be thrown into U.S. prisons, where they languish today despite the 2005 decision of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta to reverse their convictions and remand them for a new trial.

When the Cubans remember the *Maine*, it is to remember the U.S. Marines who died and the century-long war that was launched by their

sacrifice. The monument to the *Maine* in Havana Harbor has been remodeled by the Cubans, removing the triumphant imperial eagle from the top of the column and altering the inscription to commemorate the Marines and to remind people that this was the launching pad for an imperial mission that has failed to achieve its objective for over a century. Cuba remains free and independent of the U.S., impoverished though it may be.

Down the shore from the monument to the *Maine* is another sight: a public plaza laid out in front of the massive Swiss Embassy, which is in fact the office of the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba (actually this is just the façade for a U.S. embassy, complete with Marine guards, that cannot acknowledge its existence in a country with which it is technically at war). The glass façade of the embassy streams with scarcely readable, Jenny Holzer-esque red illuminated letters that are supposed to provide Cubans with a glimpse of the free-information economy of which they are deprived. When one gets close enough to read the messages, however, one is steered away by the guards. In front of the embassy, moreover, the Cubans have erected scores of flagpoles, each bearing a large black flag with a white star in the center, to represent (depending on your informant) either the number of years since the first Cuban revolution against Spain in the nineteenth century or the number of Cubans assassinated by the U.S. and its agents in the bombing of a Cuban civilian airliner. (The recognized assassin, Posada Carriles, now lives openly and immune to extradition in Miami.) There are so many flagpoles that one can scarcely see the embassy through them.

My other impressions of Havana are so hurried, glimpsed from the rain-streaked windows of taxis going between cafes and lecture rooms, that they remain fairly imprecise. Certainly one can see that Habana Vieja (or, as Cubans call it, Habana Profunda), thanks mainly to European money, is undergoing massive renovation. Havana was the jewel of the Caribbean, arguably the most important city in the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is an incredible living museum of the architecture of those periods, with a delicate, ghostly fragility caused by a half century of low maintenance. But the imperative now is to restore, not to clear away, and one can walk through the glorious colonial past amidst the atmosphere of a socialist politics and capitalist reinvestment bringing the old city back to life. One can stroll into the bar at the Hotel Ambos Mundos where Hemingway drank and somehow feel that the light slanting through the windows and the noises from the street cannot be all that different.

And then there are the cars. Havana may be the best living museum of the glory days of the American auto industry on the planet. The classics of

the fifties are everywhere, the Chevys, Cadillacs, Oldsmobiles gliding gracefully down the boulevards, lovingly maintained where possible, barely surviving and held together by ingenious patchworks of paste, sheet metal, and wire where necessary. These emblems of America at its peak of technological confidence alongside the architectural façades of European colonialism both clash and resonate together, mingled with the music that emerges from bars and cafes on every side and washed down with a *mojito* on a sultry summer afternoon—and then one can see why the Yanqui feeling toward revolutionary Cuba, when awakened from its ignorance, will be a complex mixture of affection and anxiety. All that was needed in Hemingway's bar, from my point of view, was to hear on the jukebox the strains of Bob Dylan's "Tangled Up in Blue": "There was music in the cafes at night / And revolution in the air." Perhaps a tangled blue is the right color for this brief period in Cuban history in which the anticipation of Fidel's death mingles with the clearing skies of a new social compact for the twenty-first century, beyond the war on terror and rapacious capitalism. The Cuban people, in contrast to the consumption-sated citizens of the U.S., have been asked repeatedly over the last half century to make sacrifices for the common good, to maintain their independence in a state of siege, to care for one another and for the rest of the world as well. My sense is that they have been tempered in the fires of adversity, and there is a steely resolve in the national self-image. I do not believe they will surrender their revolution or their independence without a fight.