Che Guevara: Latin American Icon

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Ernesto “Che” Guevara was born in Argentina in 1927 and spent the majority of his adult years serving under the command of Fidel Castro during the Cuban Revolution. Throughout these years Che solidified his status as a globally recognized figure by means of his relentless dedication to the emancipation of oppressed peoples, and his use of extreme military tactics. It was not until after Che’s death, however, that his image, specifically the famous photograph taken by Alberto Korda in 1960 (Anderson 465), elevated Che to the status of international icon. Korda’s photograph, which is often referred to as the most recognizable image of the twentieth century (Buhle and Seidman 101), continues to exist in popular culture today as an overwhelming presence, not only in Latin America, but on a global level, as well. Korda’s photograph of Che has been repeatedly appropriated over time for a variety of purposes; making appearances in such areas as fine art, commercial advertising and religion. By considering such ways in which Che’s image has been manipulated in order to suit a particular purpose, one can see how Che has become what Michael Casey refers to in his book, Che’s Afterlife: The Legacy of an Image, as a “postmodern icon”: an image that can mean “ anything to anyone and everything to everyone” (Kakutani par. 14).

After Che’s death in 1967, the face of the Marxist Revolutionary became somewhat of a phenomenon, particularly as a result of Fidel Castro’s preconceived effort to use “Che’s image and example, rather than his own, to personify the Cuban revolution” (Buhle and Seidman 102). In the preface to Che’s published diary Castro wrote that Che’s image is representative of “the struggle against the injustices of the oppressed and exploited and stirs up passionate interest on the part of students and intellectuals all over the world” (Castro 10). Almost immediately following Che’s death, examples of such “passionate interest” began to surface in the art community. One work in particular created by Cuban born artist Raúl Martínez in 1968 represents the immediacy in which Che’s image began to take on iconographic significance in the world of fine art (Sullivan 95). Fenix, a work that
draws inspiration from the Pop Art style of the 1960's, suggests that Che's image resonates with the famous Western icons used in Andy Warhol's silkscreen repetitions (Sullivan 95). In recent years, Liliana Porter similarly identifies Che as an iconic figure alongside Disney characters in her painting *The Simulacrum* ("Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century" 7). By including small, iconic figures in her painting Porter demonstrates how, from a contemporary perspective... the image of a revolutionary hero like Guevara can be equated with the likeness of Donald Duck" ("Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century" 7).

Porter's inclusion of Che's image in her painting alongside purchasable, iconic objects is also representative of the overwhelming presence of Che's representation in the commercial world. Perhaps one of the most recognizable products that adorn Che's image is the T-shirt created by Jim Fitzpatrick in which Korda's famous photograph is transformed into a flattened, visually pleasing graphic image (Ehrenreich par. 7). In "Capitalizing on Che Guevara's image", Ben Ehrenreich includes a list of products that have, at one point, used Che's image for advertising purposes including such items as "Che beer, Che cola, Che cigarettes [and] the inevitable CherryGuevara ice cream" (Ehrenreich par. 9). For an individual such as Che who openly fought against capitalist ideals, the use of his image as a logo in which to sell a product may seem somewhat ironic, however, as stated by Ivan de la Nuez in Ziff and Lopez's film: “Capitalism devours everything... even its worst enemies” (Ehrenreich 8).

Although popular culture has often adopted Che as a logo in which to sell a product, his image continues to exist on what some would consider to be a deeper level. For example, there are many individuals in Latin America who identify Che as a Christ-like figure who was martyred for his faith in social justice and peace. Various Latin American artists have chosen to represent Che as a saint by incorporating elements of Christian iconography in their depictions. In his painting entitled *Che with the Yellow Christ* (1997), Sergio Michilini replaces the face of Gauguin in his *Self Portrait with Yellow Christ* (1890) with that of Che's in order to convey the triangular relationship between “atheism, art, and Christianity” (Kunzle 106). Another image of Che that incorporates Christian iconography can be seen in the work of Oscar Rojas in his “1997 pyrographic portrait of Che dead, on wood” (Kunzle 105). In Rojas' interpretation of Freddy Alborta’s photograph in which Che's deceased body is depicted (Costañeda xiii), Rojas includes the Christian crown of thorns in order to make a visual connection between Christ and Che's shared experiences of martyrdom (Kunzle 105).

As demonstrated in the works that combine Che's image with Christian iconography, there are many individuals who consider the lasting presence of Che in popular culture to be a positive celebration of his memory. However, there are many who oppose the use of Che's image, particularly in regards to the ways in which his representation is appropriated for media and consumerist purposes. As demonstrated in the following quote by Anthony Daniels from his article “The Real Che”, there are many intellectuals who consider the “cult” of Che to be nothing more than a popular fascination: “With few exceptions, the devotees of the cult of Guevara know little about him or what he actually stood for” (Daniels 1). Ehrenreich similarly argues that as a result of the mass commercialization of Che's image “the shadows and complexities of Che's life and legacy disappeared” (Ehrenreich 8). It may be that Che Guevara himself would dislike the constant use of his image as he was once described as “resenting” the camera's “intrusion” (Quiroga 93), and it is hard to deny the ironic transformation of a man who once fought against capitalist society to a figure whose image is now used to sell teddy bears (Taub 4).

There are, however, many intellectuals who argue that despite Che Guevara's overwhelming media presence in relation to certain products that (for some) do not seem appropriate, his image continues to represent the ideals that Che Guevara originally stood for. Gallery curator Trisha Ziff argues that “despite multiple t-shirts, g-strings, bras and badges... there are people in the world who actually see [Che] as a symbol of change, of
Whether it appears in fine art, commercials, as a label or logo, in religious iconography or in the media, the image of Che Guevara continues to be a lasting presence in popular culture. In regards to the long debated issue as to whether or not Che’s image continues to be a figure of cultural significance or commoditized to the point of being void of purpose, Trisha Ziff seems to provide an admirable compromise: “We cannot get away from the context of Che Guevara, whether we like him or hate him... the fact that he lived and died for the ideas in which he believed... penetrates constantly in the image” (Lotz par. 19).

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Works Cited


Amongst the youth of Latin America, Guevara’s memoir The Motorcycle Diaries has become a cult favorite with college students and young intellectuals.[23] This has allowed Guevara to emerge as “a romantic and tragic young adventurer, who has as much in common with Jack Kerouac or James Dean as with Fidel Castro.”[23] Speaking on this phenomenon, biographer Jon Lee Anderson, has. “Che Guevara - hero of the Cuban Revolution, left-wing icon and the face that has sold more posters than anyone else in history. ^ President Evo Morales pays tribute to Che Guevara by The Latin American and Caribbean Information Center of the Florida International University. ^ Hugo Chavez Superstar by The Guardian. ^ Castro, Chavez Tour Che Guevara’s Home by MSNBC. And Che Guevara has become an icon of the Latin American left. In many ways, he’s much more celebrated and honored today than he was while he was alive. While he was alive, the Cuban Revolution symbolized something of a break between the old Communist-based Latin American left, with its emphasis on reform and