

Images of the Day Before

Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo

The image of the island has been abused in our national imagination.

The island as isolation, as continental abandonment, as lyrical gentleness, as the least firm of the earth, as origin and teleology, as unsinkable (unbearable) cork, as poetic cause of the measure of all things.

Cuba can be this and much more, surely. But Cuba is, above all, illusion. An endemic disease called hope. And, more than illusion, Cuba could be pure instinct.

We can violate the etymology of "instinct" and define it starting from "instant." The instantaneous, the snapshot. What can not be re-read a moment later and therefore must be fixed before it disappears. The precarious.

And we are talking, then, about photographs: the most common of household objects, the most commercial, the most immobile of genres, also the most democratic (like with firearms, whether we have a license or not, we can all go out and shoot: click, flash).

Each frame is a part of the same film, a documentary trailer of socialized dreams that nobody is in a hurry to wake up from. Half monstrous dreams meant to engender reasoning, but they ended up engendering rationing and cynicism.

Involuntary snoring to sustain our own voice. Free tracheotomies with which the system tattoos us voluntarily, perhaps before birth. Artificial respiration of the broken motor of a thousand and one horizontally positioned generations: the pose that attracts the least attention from authority. The fetal posture, which is still what most protects us (that other illusion of returning to the womb where the social damage still hasn't touched us).

Pedestrians in peace, lying on the metropolitan dirt, at risk of being trampled by the flows of desire and urban footwork of the capital. Self-capitalism, a minimal market whose geography is so incipient.

Barefoot and decrepit, against the columns, as befits an uncivil citizenship. A country cannot be commanded like an encampment, of course: it's as if every countryman were in his own encampment. Anyway, in the end we are discovered because Havana is exactly the impossibility of an interior space. Everything is open, everything exposed, political promiscuity where the forbidden rules, sites of maximum visibility. Paternalistic surveillance childish punishment, while we change our make-up every day so that no one or nothing changes us

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from year to year.

And also a touch of animal tenderness. And another bit of humor, as a reminder of the human condition misplaced in some legal loophole. The Cuban Constitution as a gag, a shroud, a memorandum of the equitable death by official decree. In the photos, the ephemeral becomes eternal, glance becomes matter, either by an inspired stroke of composition or by a miracle of chance (or by both).

Be it a nightmare or be it human sorrow, be it civil abandonment or be it solidarity. But a snapshot is always a climax of intensity. Impromptu, almost unbearable for its unexpected character, often intolerable.

In a desert climate like that of Cuba (red hot ideology by day, by night masses chilled between hypocrisy and idiocy), in a claustrophobic atmosphere, of hysterical enthusiasms and national apathy (with blind lines of flight to an outside, an outside often suicidal), in a landscape of cracks that boast of their rudeness, a landscape reduced to a wasteland where even repression is boring and God seems a yawn, there is nothing more inviting than intensity. Nor anything more impossible.

Without this accelerated raw material, there would be no event nor creation. The intensity of the caught instant lifts what was just a mute act to its most inconceivable symbolic resonances. The intensity is a vector that goes from the physical to the metaphorical, from light to illumination, from earth to air. Ultimately, from the political to the poetic. The intensity can even be invented, and in the end always contains traces of truth.

Instant, stop: you are so beautiful ... What are the symptoms of such beauty?

The fall, the scaffold. Emerging make-believe, unknown forces in secret tension, momentum (which in physics is connected with mass and velocity), commonplaces on the point of disequilibrium (the instant as an announcement of the unusual), Cuba as collision.

After decades of decaying bodies, erased by mass statistics, suddenly Cuba is conceived as recovery. The urgency of motion erases the vocation of eternity of the image. Diaphragms wide open, provocative. Temptation of a liquid light, dripping. Humidity of a story already without histology. Sensuality confronting censorship. Eros, rather than heroes. Reflections, more than rhetoric. Revelation, rather than revolution.

And amid the chaos, the fragmentary not so much as an aesthetic solution, but as a strategy against the notion of absolute. The fragment as private ethic of the individual: the part against the total, anti-fractal theory, post-metonymy, implausible versions of the truth, the incomplete as fragility but also as resistance to the tabula rasa that is the legacy of all totalitarianism at its terminal phase. Rewriting of official iconography. Iconoclastic revenge, long overdue for art in

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Cuba, and long penalized for its artists. The palimpsest as the antithesis of the very monolithism of any wall. It is, in the end, the discarding of a tradition that was announced to us as perennial.

The accumulation of layers of meaning begins to outline a kind of archeology of wiping the slate and starting new. The great wall of Havana is now open like a large mural. Amnesia is friendly like a benevolent madness that takes us back to childhood. I suspect we socialize in the style of a senile zombie.

In this new narrative the residues and sketches predominate. In this new no-narrative contamination in its beneficial sense predominates: the dilution of the grandiloquent speeches, the minimal disseminating deeply without anyone noticing it, while the pictographic ruins of our stateless Pompeii will become ever more difficult to decode.

Inhabitants of barbarism, syllable by syllable, we can still recognize a certain sense of meaning, but in practice we have forgotten how to read: today the words and phrases give us the impression of having been emptied of content, of being chiseled from an obsolete language, sometimes obscene. Havana as a dead language, a Martian tongue, a kind of Latin argot taken to its very limits. Paradoxically, this illiteracy in Cuba is our only guarantee of access to the future. Not understanding protects us from participating, for example, of the ridiculous despotisms of the propaganda. Of the verticality and outbursts of power. Not understanding, too, is a supreme act of insubordination, of subverting the signals of consensus, to be ultimately, subjects beyond all logic and all governability.

Abandoning the tired habit of interpretation can be the unpredictable first step towards freedom. More than a vocabulary, we depend on a vocabul-arid. Dryness of repetition, patterns of argument that are repeated ad nauseam. Invisible verbal violence, not so much through public offence as through the secrecy that provokes panic and terror. It's those innuendos that threaten and grip the Cuban soul, beyond the myth of insularity and its exception exiles. More than a vocabulary, we hang by a voCUBAlary.

Even love and desire are based on these synthetic ambuguities, accumulated privileges, phobia of the other. Not only phobia of the different but phobia of the identical. Homophobia, in its universal sense: fear of the other, the drive to annihilate.

Sometimes one is tempted to accept that language exists because communication is impossible. There is no message now that could overcome the force of gravity, everything tends to precipitate. The ground prevails here above the ideals. There is no ideology which at these times doesn't look a bit idiotic. Paradise, fortunately, is lost, not so much deserted as defected. Perimeter marks were left, rigid limits for being already so sclerotic, the bars that define the magnitude of the trap: the panopticon as orthopedics so that the intellect does not insist on existing as such.

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Mercy will be left, which was mistreated by the glance, the urgency of a gesture of salvation that restores the prestige of naivety. Cutting of silhouettes, Cubaneseque shadows on the claustrophobic backdrop of the horizon. Straitjackets, forgetfulness that obliges the posthumous to prevail over the probable, where a perfect past prevents the uncertainty of all futurity. Time coagulated, achronological. Architecture understood as archeology.

Maps, elementary geometry, recurring itinerary like the dreams we don't dare to stop dreaming. Theory of the labyrinth. The art of waiting. Audiovisual coda of those who have lost hope for a new signal. Counterlight to countercurrent. The image of the Island is inexhaustible in our national imagination. The island that rises from its own ashes, like a Phoenix or maybe a malephic Aleph, magic object of the multiplicity, where all the times are still possible, schizophrenic at the same time. The spontaneous reaction against decades of paranoia could be hidden over there: to lose one's face, to be others in another place, not belonging, giving up a national grammar that called no one and for the good of no one. We elude ourselves right on the day before: if the transition will be just a theatrical trick, then we Cubans today choose not to play on the day after.

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