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Fifty Shades of Che

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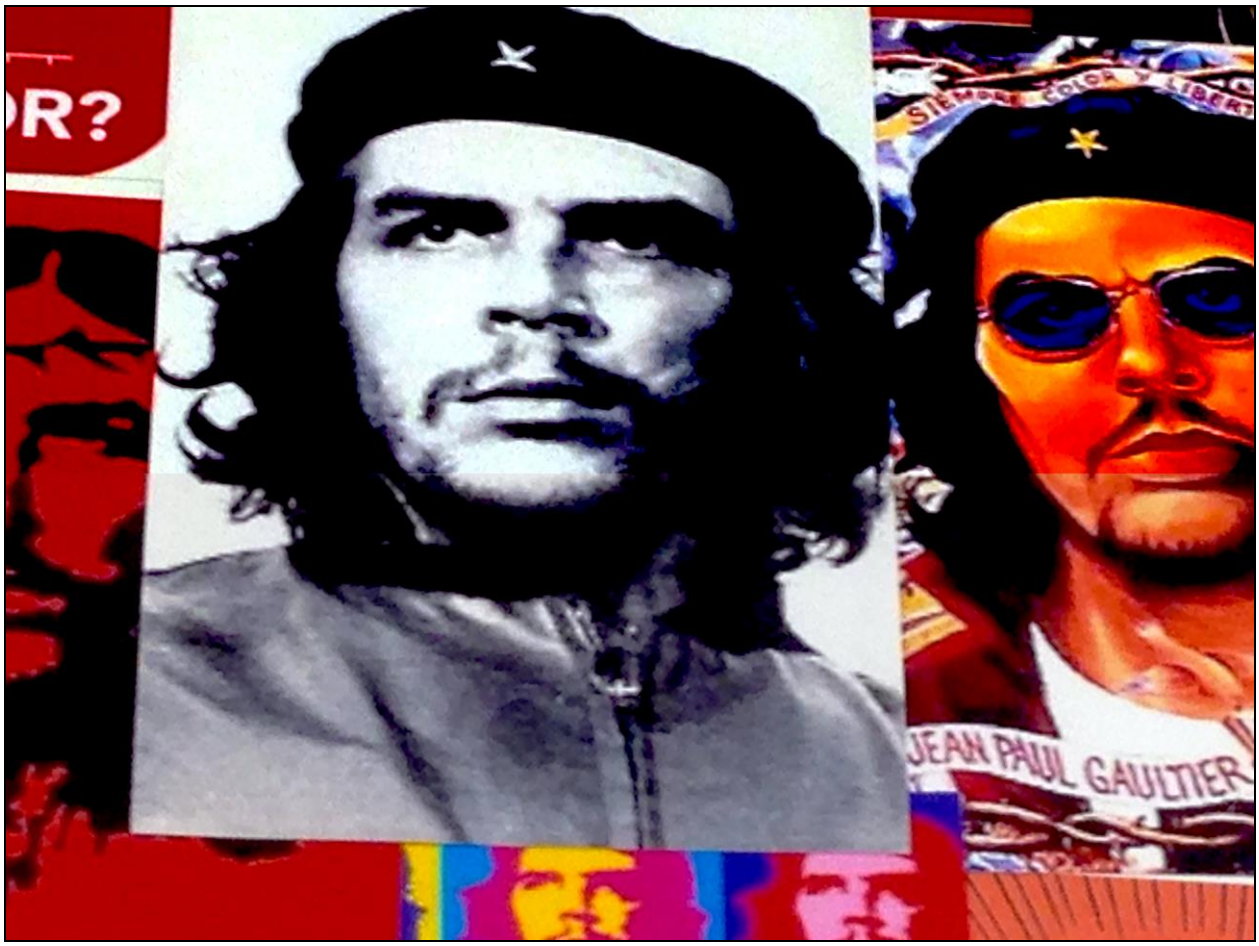
"50 Shades of Che" by Stephen Cruikshank, as presented in the *Stirred Pop-Up Exhibit*, University of Alberta, September 30, 2015. The mosaic reveals fifty interpretations of Che in popular culture ranging from photography, magazines, film, books, paintings, graffiti, and graphic images.

Ernesto Che Guevara — the man gets around, even nearly fifty years since his death. He is everywhere, a living mnemonic ghost of revolution that has mapped its way through time, culture, and space. "50 Shades of Che" (2015), a mosaic of fifty images of Che Guevara that I put together, evokes how the memory of Che has been translated into numerous visual representations. My project is not a new endeavour. There have been various scholars who have explored the dispersion of Che's image throughout popular culture, *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon* (2006) by Trisha Ziff, *Che's Afterlife: The Legacy of an Image* (2009) by Michael Casey, and *The Semiotics of Che Guevara: Affective Gateways* (2015) by Maria-Carolina Cambre to name a few. The fascination of Che's image, beginning with Alberto Korda's infamous photograph of Che *'Guerrillero Heroico'*, has led to its visualized evidence all over the world. Korda's image that sees Che's face tilted upwards with a pondering and spirited expression that envisions the future has, as Hanna Charlton describes, "been transformed from revolutionary legend to an ingredient in global marketing, to a generic, high-street visual emblem for a vague notion of dissent, rebellion and political awareness, as well as becoming the subject of kitsch and spook makeovers" (*Revolutionary and Icon*, 7). The success of Che's image in traversing time, culture, and space is largely a result of the iconic symbolism it has adopted. The



Alberto Korda's photo of Che, "Guerrillero Heroíco" is visible in the centre of mosaic. The majority of the photos represented in "50 Shades of Che" are directly influenced from Korda's iconic photo. Photo credit: Stephen Cruikshank.

history of Che, the man, has largely been replaced by the visual representation of the ideals he has promoted such as "revolution", "rebellion", and "adventure". Therefore, what Michael Casey implies as 'Che's afterlife' refers not to the existing memory of Che Guevara himself, but rather to the translational quality of Che as an icon dispersed throughout popular culture — an image "that is taken to another level, since the very idea of immortality is contained in that image" (*Che's Afterlife*, 347). The memory of Che is therefore shaped into something eternal. Che's memory lives on through image, however it is arguable as to how authentic this "new life" is to that of the deceased man. Che (the icon), however does not require an authentic representation of Ernesto (the man). Instead, Che's image is free to be inserted into any place or culture highlighting an assortment of values, critiques, and ideals. Such is what happens when human beings with bodies and mouths speaking words become icons with printed images and figures speaking ideology. They become "pasteable" — copy, clip, crop, paste, print, *voila*, presented before you is Che Guevara, a man-image, a corporeal symbol moulded to the vacillating shades of popular culture.

Icons like Che are marketable on a global scale not because they are famous, but because they are both famous and translatable. Furthermore, the process of translation has to be meaningful. Therefore, Che (the symbol of revolution) if inserted, let's say onto the face of a beer bottle label, now reveals this type of beer to be… you guessed it: *revolutionary*. The revolution of politics and Latin American emancipation now becomes the revolution of hops and libation; Che's *hombre nuevo* becomes a *cerveza nueva*. We see the singularity of a man with a physical body and identity translated into an icon that flourishes in multiple forms and within various ideologies. This is the ideological effect of mass media and capitalist popular culture, one that urges for the plural contextualization out of single elements; a single man translates into many legends, a single image translates into an eclectic array of ideals. The iconic image is in fact the essence of the ideologies surrounding it. The word "idea" originates from the Greek verb "to see," connecting the notions of vision and concept. The image therefore gives birth to the idea; the image of Che's face opens the door for the deconstruction of the man into the visible representation of ideology. The "idea" of Che is then available to be twisted, changed, contorted, ironized, and translated into something that speaks to us, something that makes the quotidian realities around us absorb the ideological sentiment engraved in that image — Che becomes 'iconized'. The cliental therefore do not drink merely a beer, but a revolution; they ingest not only the saccharrification of starch and fermentation of its sugars, but participate in something far greater — an ideal.

Today's reality is one whereby people are hungry to devour ideals and insert them into the culture around us, fuelling the charismatic imaginings of today with the actions of yesterday. We see yesterday's revolution becomes today's coffee cup; last week's guerrilla fighter become this week's cell-phone cover. This is a mnemonic translation whereby memory retained in a visual object is now translated into something different than what the actual memory once represented. Seeing the image of Che, people are not led to remember the detailed history of the man inasmuch as they are compelled to acknowledge a set of ideas fashioned out of that history. This newly translated memory of Che becomes a collective cultural practice rather than an individual act of remembering. It is

precisely the collective act of *remembering/translating* Che that maintains Che as an icon rather than passing him up as a materialized fad. Rather than see "[Che's] memory falling victim to trivialization by commodification," as Larson and Lizardo conclude, "remembering Che Guevara has become a highly structured collective act of distinction" (431). The man who was a distinguished revolutionary

The image of "Cheikevara" is seen here in "50 Shades of Che," depicting a knock off label of the Czech beer "Chechvar". Photo credit: Stephen Cruikshank.

Placed centre left in the mosaic, Andy Warhol's Cambell soup depiction is restructured as "Cuba's Ideology soup," evoking the action of 'drinking in Che's communist ideology'. Photo credit: Stephen Cruikshank.

in history therefore becomes the symbol for distinguishing oneself within a collective conscience. As such, it is not surprising to see the images of Che constantly accumulate over time and translate into emblems of materialist culture. Materialism depends on selling the idea of uniqueness at a collective scale, that is, the ability to market something as valuable to one's identity by means of assimilating an ideology special to their community. It is for this reason that an icon is best idealized with an object, something visible, tangible, and physical. Memory on the other hand is more fragile than materials, easier to be forgotten. Therefore, Che on a t-shirt is no longer a memory itself but rather a mnemonic symbol that can be easily received and preserved by popular culture. One may not have known Che in person, but a simple object such as a silk-screen face on a piece of clothing or souvenir will allow them to collectively participate in the lasting ideals of Che, no matter how contorted the insertion of these ideals may be. They do not have to do a lot: put on a t-shirt with Korda's photograph, walk around and advertise themselves to the world — in doing so they have exposed the icon and become a modern day statute of revolutionary idealism. In this respect the image of Che has made the Revolution quotidian, something reachable and tangible for the ordinary individual. This has been the case for almost fifty years now. Two years from now will mark the fiftieth anniversary of Che's death, and with it, a vast history of translating the man — one man, fifty shades.

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