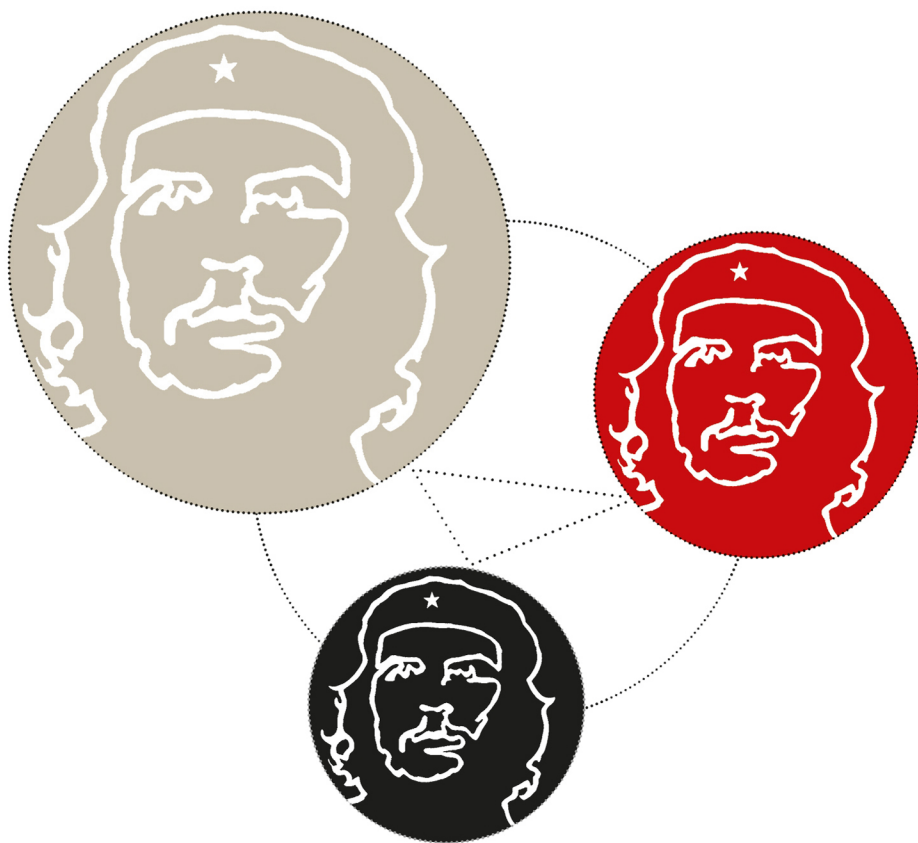


Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics

# THE SEMIOTICS OF CHE GUEVARA

AFFECTIVE GATEWAYS

MARIA-CAROLINA CAMBRE



B L O O M S B U R Y

# The Semiotics of Che Guevara

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# The Semiotics of Che Guevara

## Affective Gateways

Maria-Carolina Cambre

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*In memory of my father.  
Your love, grace and humour were boundless.  
Your deep spirituality and thirst for justice unquenchable.  
Until we see each other again.*

*This book is for all those who never give up.*



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## Note on photographs

Every reasonable effort has been made to trace and acknowledge the ownership of the copyrighted material. Any errors that may have occurred are inadvertent, and will be corrected in subsequent editions, provided notification is sent to the author. Because I have been collecting photographs where Guevara's face appears since 2004, many of the Internet sites that once featured them are no longer available. Regardless, I only downloaded images that were designated “in the public domain” and the primary source for these has been the Indymedia network.

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Commons and GNU Free Documentation Licenses. Indymedia is a messy but beautiful thing.

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## Introduction

In a society that is visually super-saturated, we have become accustomed to using and producing images. The significance of taking pictures seriously and grasping the visual conceptually is well established. While we navigate the image-scape successfully, we may not necessarily understand how images work on or with us, nor what becomes of reality when it is understood to function in relation to the image's perspective. Remarkably, insights into the pedagogical functions of the power and effect of visual images have not kept pace with this paradigm shift as the continued identification of knowledge with language reveals. Images represent an *other* mode of thinking. They bring new possibilities for imagining social and political change. As a result, I have come to understand images as not just visual documentation but also as cultural labour. Correspondingly, this book invites readers to participate in a visual interaction with images of Ernesto “Che” Guevara through their multiple and varied renderings.

This book is about the way an image—the most reproduced image in the history of photography—has been and is worked and reworked. The central image, from which the multitude of “spin-offs” have been produced, is known as *Guerrillero Heroico*,<sup>1</sup> and was taken by in March 1960 by Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez (familiarily known as Korda).

Images have a multivalent nature and a tendency to allow multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations. By their very nature, images challenge authoritative interpretations since elements one person overlooks may be noted by another. Additionally, there is perhaps some fear of giving visuals a prominent space in academic work. This book does not pretend to be the final word on the significations of Guevara's image in action and has both its advantages and its limitations. It aims to create a space for understanding the

phenomenon and for providing a starting point for a better perspective of the semiotic significance of visual events in the public arena, as well as for their cultural and socio/political resonance.

I agree with Marcus and Fischer's (1986) observations that "In periods when fields are without secure foundations, practices become the engine of innovation" (quoted in Lather 1994, 37). Expanding on this belief, Lather notes that responsibility has shifted from "representing things in themselves to representing the web of 'Structure, Sign, and Play' of social relations [Derrida 1978]. It is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing—spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge" (Lather 1994, 38).

### A note on the life and death of Che Guevara

Ernesto "Che" Guevara was born in Argentina, June 14, 1928 (although the exact date is sometimes disputed) and was assassinated October 9, 1967 in Bolivia having been a major figure in Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution (1953–9). A revolutionary, physician, writer, guerilla leader, diplomat, and military theorist and marxist thinker, he has become a symbol of anti-imperialism and rebellion throughout the world—as can be seen through the lens of the continuing salience of the photographic image of him that is the subject of this book. He is one of the relatively few people who can instantly be recognized by just his nickname: "Che" which roughly translates as friend—as in, for example, mate, or pal, but is more often an Argentinism for saying "hey."

As a young medical student, he was moved with a desire to alleviate the poverty, hunger, and disease he witnessed throughout South America, which he attributed to capitalist exploitation by the United States.

He became involved in Guatemala's social reforms, and was radicalized after witnessing how President Jacobo Arbenz was overthrown in a U.S.-backed military coup. He then joined Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro and the group that would become known as the July 26 Movement. They would finally overthrow of U.S.-backed Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista who was prone to have his forces leave corpses of those they had questioned and tortured to death on street corners as lessons to the populace. As the guerrillas took over territory, they would re-distribute the land amongst the peasants, which served to increase their support. Eventually, entire military units would defect and join the guerrillas and, after a failed election, Batista fled the country.

Guevara was prominent in the new government in, for example, reviewing the sentences given by the revolutionary tribunals, reforms in agrarian land, industry, and in promoting literacy. He acted as a Cuban diplomat abroad, and was Minister for Industries from 1961–5.

Castro's revolution in 1959 had a strong nationalist orientation that conflicted with U.S. interests. Washington's reaction was to rupture relations in 1961 and impose an economic blockade. After the failed Bay of Pigs invasion by a C.I.A.-sponsored paramilitary group, the Cuban government tacked toward the U.S.S.R. and an alignment that would establish a communist regime.

Critical of the Soviets, and concerned about Cuba's relative isolation, Guevara left Cuba in 1965, intent on aiding revolution elsewhere. He was eventually wounded and captured by C.I.A.-paramilitaries and Bolivian forces and shot. His watch and other personal effects were taken as trophies, while his hands were removed from his corpse ostensibly for later finger-print identification. His remains were interred in a secret mass grave together with his companions and were discovered (or revealed) 30 years later in 1997.

Guevara is both revered and reviled, the subject of a plethora of films and literary endeavors, though it is the Korda image that is the most compelling memory in world-wide popular culture. Ironically, this image was a "grab-shot"—taken on the spur of the moment when Che was unaware, in 1960, with Alberto Korda's Leica camera. It was a moment of utter surprise for the photographer at the force of the gaze emitted by Guevara.

## My research into the image of "Che" Guevara

My interest in the Korda image of "Che" comes somewhat obliquely out of personal experience, at least to the extent that my conceptualization of the project was influenced by my realization that this phenomenon was important. I will briefly identify myself as someone with roots in different places, who recognizes the possibility of laying down more roots in more places in the future. Some roots are stronger than others but they hold my path in place enough so that I can to some extent trace it. Ontologically neither a tree nor a rhizome provides an adequate form to represent this way of being; instead it would look more like an ivy which develops roots from its stem as it advances in accord with its host soil and adapts to its surfaces and geological features from the radican family. Accordingly, in turn, I have not located this image or designated its "address." Instead, I examined how it is a



*locating*—how it is a verb as well as a noun. How it enables the distribution of the visual.

My intention is that this book will contribute to understandings of how images are working in the world and consequently to how people can produce and direct the visual space rather than be relegated to merely receiving or consuming them. I hasten to add that though the consumption of images is never totally passive, what I am gesturing toward is the built-in impetus of advertising images toward their subconscious consumption. The implications of seeing the vernacular image of “Che” Guevara as something that does not fit in the already designed mass media methods of study, point toward its being a somewhat different phenomenon.

My claim founders unless I show that recognition of images is as valid a way to communicate as words. I have therefore explored different approaches, and provided a series of encounters with this image and looked at the levels at which it operates and how it moves fluidly between them. I will introduce these to you in no particular order following the notion of collage but also following my own processual wandering.

#### 1. The branding discourse

I considered the visual climate, accounts and stories of how people respond to the image, and the current debates surrounding the politicization of this image. I focused on the key debate surrounding the commoditization of the image and its supposed emptying of power or meaning that has been the point of division around which those who admire Guevara the historical figure confront those who decry him as an assassin. I find the virulence of the debate to be a commanding indicator of the saliency of this image today. (This topic is discussed in Chapter 2.)

#### 2. Phenomenology

I explored the personal experiences of people who have encountered or been impacted by the image in some way through a phenomenological approach where participants share anecdotes about their experiences with this image. In Chapter 3, I discuss how phenomenologists such as Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Levinas and Roland Barthes provide theoretical lenses for reflection and analysis. Because participants frequently connect hope to their experiences of the image, I expanded on this concept as an animating motif, and as a contribution to understandings of the acting/being of the *Guerrillero Heroico*.

### 3. Ethnographic case study—Caracas

A group of youths in urban Caracas, Venezuela in a slum called 23 de enero, decorated their entire neighborhood with images of Che. Through their words and the images in their neighborhood, I outline in Chapter 4 how, in 2007, I eventually made contact to carry out fieldwork studies. They taught me how they come to an understanding of praxis and action with reference to Che Guevara's face in their neighborhood. I draw on Hannah Arendt's (1959) theory of action as a parallel to what these youths called "actioning." Their concept of "actioning" brings to the fore the performative aspects of the image in a way that scholarly work in the area of the visual has yet to reach. "Actioning" through their use of imagery becomes the codes by which these youths resist, rage, cry, and hope in the possibility of throwing off the imperial yoke and all its colonial weight. I still wear their bandana as recognition of my continuing obligation to them.

### 4. Semiotics

I explored C. S. Peirce's doctrine of signs and followed up on Donald Preziosi's (2003) with an elaboration of Roman Jakobson's addition of a fourth sign type, namely artifice. The inclusion of artifice is underwritten by an understanding of A. J. Greimas' (1987) semiotic square as a way to introduce complexity into binary or dual forms. I position the square as a dynamic, fractal-like construction—fluid in the sense that it is continually multiplying and contingent. (A discussion of this is in Chapter 5.)

### 5. Collage/IRMs (Indigenous Research Methodologies)

I also discuss the fifth aspect of my research in Chapter 5, which is more visual, and underpinned by IRMs and principles: it manifests itself in an arts-led approach. The first layer of this visual section is a reflection on my own journey in coming to know Che Guevara through his image and becoming someone who can express that knowledge by learning through materially interacting with hundreds of examples of variations on that one picture. I use collage as a discursive strategy to offer a sequence that is nonlinear and contributes toward opening a space of representation that allows alternative forms. The image is the threshold of that space, creating it, a way out, and offering new understandings and a way to demonstrate truths rather than explicate them.

This trading in forms has allowed me to follow Trinh T. Minh-Ha's suggestion about challenging the regimes of representation—this citation from her work has been a point of reference for mine:

To challenge the regimes of representation  
That govern a society is to conceive of how a  
Politics can transform reality. As this creative  
Struggle moves onward, it is bound to  
Recompose subjectivity and praxis. More  
Often than not, it requires that one leave the  
Realms of the known, and take oneself there  
Where one does not expect, is not expected to be.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (1991)

## Stealing the Image? Copyright and the Failed Branding of Che Guevara's Image

### Background

Through an examination of the controversies surrounding the use of the *Guerrillero Heroico* in a Cuban context within and outside of Cuba, and finally the non-Cuban context, I examine some of the appropriations of and discourses traversing this image in order to illuminate its location, or dislocation as the case may be, as a brand, commercial product, artwork, and/or cultural artifact. Since its first publication the picture has inspired artists<sup>1</sup> around the world to modify



Figure 2.1: "Is the revolution just a t-shirt away?" Graffiti of Che Guevara in Bergen, Norway. January 2009 by Sveter (source: Wikimedia commons)

and render it in a myriad of media and styles.<sup>2</sup> However when Smirnoff's U.K. advertising agency wanted to use the image to sell vodka in 1999, Korda, who had made no issue with previous iterations, sued them. "The ads depicted Che's face adorned with a pattern of hammers and chilli-pepper sickles, not to foster communist consciousness in a creative redeployment of commodity fetishism, but simply to promote a new spice line of Smirnoff vodka" (Hernandez-Reguant 2008, 257). The company settled out of court and gave Korda a significant sum that he promptly donated to a hospital in Cuba. Regardless of the fame and accompanying profit potential from this photograph, Korda refused to endorse its commercialization and certainly did not gain financially. Korda claimed that using Che's image for selling vodka was a "slur on his [Guevara's] name" emphasizing that Che "never drank himself, was not a drunk, and [that] drink should not be associated with his immortal memory" (Frontline 2002, online).

After the international lawsuit, Korda's rights as the author were recognized publicly and spokespeople for many media conglomerates in Europe and the U.S. saw it as an unprecedented move on the part of the Cuban government toward capitalism. The debate that had been bubbling under the surface for decades finally spilled onto mainstream headlines:

*The Times* of London wryly recast this development as if it were the Argentine revolutionary's own long and hard fought victory ... 'After 40 Years, Che Beats Forces of Capitalism' (Bird 2000). CNN.com likewise dramatized the event, but with a slightly less ironic, and more-to-the-point, headline: 'Social Justice, Sí. Vodka Advertisements, No.' (Hernandez-Reguant 2008, 256)

While *The Times* of London and CNN position the use of copyright in this case as distinctly non-commercial, *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Michael Casey (2009) takes the opposite stance. Casey (2009), who wrote the only book-length English language (at the time) examination of the biography of Korda's *Guerrillero Heroico* comments, "Che had not beaten capitalism; he had joined it" (313) and dismisses the photograph, "copyright number VA-1-276-975," as no more than "a nine-character alphanumeric code" (337). In a more bizarre twist Larson and Lizardo (2007) cite Alvaro Vargas Llosa calling the image of Guevara the "quintessential brand of *capitalism*" (426, my emphasis). Yet literature on this particular photograph and its subsequent renderings does not reveal evidence attesting the purchase of Guevara-sporting products merely in order to champion capitalism.

A historical perspective reveals that portraits of Guevara have tended to surface at key political moments. The *New York Times* of May 2, 1961 runs the

headline "Castro Rules Out Elections in Cuba" (A2) on the first page with a large feature image. Apparently for May Day celebrations in 1961, before Guevara's death, "portraits of Karl Marx, Raul Castro, the Minister of Armed Forces, and Maj. Ernesto Guevara ... [were] being carried by athletes in parade in Havana" (*New York Times* 1961, also noted in Larson and Lizardo 2007). This was not the *Guerrillero Heroico* but an official portrait of the sort often trotted out for political marches, and marking Guevara's face as part of the official visual equipment of the new government, without making his image conspicuous in any special way.

With respect to the *Guerrillero Heroico*, the Cuban context is unique. After the news of Guevara's death, on Monday, October 16, 1967<sup>3</sup> the *Granma* newspaper, official organ of the Communist Party in Cuba, printed a special edition dedicated to Che Guevara. The cover, a full-page image of Korda's *Guerrillero Heroico*, was so well received that it was reprinted the next day. On the night of October 18, in the Plaza de la Revolución the same picture was hung as the background for the public stage from which Fidel Castro would give Guevara's eulogy. According to Cuban historian Reinaldo Morales Campos (2010),<sup>4</sup> the impact of Castro's public eulogy extolling Guevara's intelligence, courage, and human sensibility as a model revolutionary figure, had the effect of fusing this with Korda's picture in the minds of those who witnessed the event and "led to the image being taken up as an effigy of the *Guerrillero Heroico* to highlight his image worldwide" (personal communication).

After Feltrinelli's publication of Guevara's *Bolivian Diaries* in early 1968 with the *Guerrillero Heroico* on the cover and about a million posters to promote the book, there was a global explosion of reproductions, often in the form of protest posters. Larson and Lizardo (2007) observe that, "the *New York Times* repeatedly connected Che to Marxist social movements in Europe and the Americas" (428) around this time. In the 1960s, a bedroom "without a poster of Che Guevara was hardly furnished at all" (Storey [2001, 88] cited in Larson and Lizardo 2007: 428). Jorge R. Bermúdez (2006) suggests a global transcendence of the *Guerrillero Heroico* signaling its use in the memorable days of the Parisian barricades in May 1968; in the slaughter of Mexican students in Tlatelolco; in clashes in Milan, during the Prague Spring uprising; and in youth protests in the U.S.A. against the Vietnam War.

Larson and Lizardo (2007) mark a significant peak of visibility in the U.S.A. at the time Guevara's remains were revealed in Bolivia in 1997. Tracing the discourses around Guevara in Spain and the U.S.A. from 1955–2006, they

describe a tonal shift in the *New York Times*' headlines. For example the title, "From Rebel to Pop Icon" in the Arts Pages moves toward emphasizing the photograph's commercial quality by honing in on its accompaniment by a wave of products sporting the image (428). In this article, Doreen Carvajal interviews Jim Fleischer, of Fischer Skis who was reproducing Che's image on its promotional materials even while dissociating itself from the man himself: "We felt that the Che image—just the icon and not the man's doings—represented what we wanted: revolution, extreme change" (*New York Times*, 1997). Somewhat confusingly, Carvajal (1997) also cites José Borges, a spokesman for the Cuban Mission to the United Nations: "We have always been against any commercial use of his image ... one thing is to promote his image and his example, and another thing is to use it as a way to get more money."

Oddly Larson and Lizardo (2007) follow with what they position as the *New York Times*' final words on the matter: "In light of this mountain of damning evidence, the *New York Times* concluded, in Europe and the United States, Che's image owes its commercial appeal to the absence of political content" (Rosenberg 1997). Making this statement look as if it is a conclusion is misleading because, first, it is taken from a different article than the one they were using, and, second, it is not a conclusion. Rather it is one of the opening paragraphs in Tina Rosenberg's article "The World Resurrects Che" written months later on July 20 and followed by a letter to the Editor, written in response on that very day, from a reader named David Silver entitled "Would Che have Turned Capitalist? Never!" (1997). Ironically, in the face of this so-called "mountain of damning evidence" Silver (1997) protests: "Tina Rosenberg jumps to an unwarranted conclusion" grounding his claim with a citation from one of Guevara's letters to the Editor of *Marcha*, a Uruguayan weekly newspaper. Silver (1997) underlines Guevara's stress on the danger of bourgeois ideology and its seductive appeal to oppressed and exploited people: "in capitalist society man is controlled by a pitiless law usually beyond his comprehension. The alienated human specimen is tied to society as a whole by an individual umbilical cord: the law of value." Epitomized in this snapshot of exchanges published in the *New York Times*, the status of the meaning, memory and value of Che Guevara's image appears to be hotly contested.

## The politics of branding

More often than not, copyright law's purpose is to protect the author's right to obtain commercial benefit from work,<sup>5</sup> but we know this was not Korda's goal.

By having potential users of the image ask permission before availing themselves of it, copyright laws also safeguard an author's general right to control how a work is utilized. Can it be assumed that copyrighting this image means it is automatically pressed into commercial service? Perhaps recent developments in legalities do not allow its meaning, value, and usage to be summed up so simply. For example, there are multitudinous artistic and vernacular renderings of the *Guerrillero Heroico* that Korda or his estate (managed by his daughter Diana Díaz) do not prosecute or pursue. Evidently, "what it [the image] has come to mean has been the subject of much speculation" (Poyner 2006, 34). Perhaps copyright laws are being applied in an unconventional way, a way that exceeds the frames and models of analysis usually applied through the Berne Convention and the multitude of nation-specific laws. Perhaps we can examine the problematics of how different people take up the image, as well as how the image itself invokes and provokes action, to better understand the dynamics of appropriation.

The notions of brand, trademark and logo are often bandied about interchangeably with respect to the *Guerrillero Heroico* by those who would see its copyrighting as an appropriation of the image as a 'mark' of something. For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to logo as a graphic, and logotype as the lettering/words: together logo and logotype form a trademark following the legal discourse. The brand then is the entire package of graphics, name, messaging and communications, visual identity, marketing strategies, and individual experiences with the business, product, or service. Robert E. Moore provides some definitional guidelines for understanding exactly what a brand, or what the essential ingredients for considering something a brand might be. According to Moore "brands are often defined as a form of protection: they protect the consumer from counterfeit goods, and they protect the producer from unfair competition" (2003, 332). Additionally, he observes that in an era where branding processes seem to encompass far more than products and services, and that all sorts of experiences, events, leaders, nations, and even wars are being branded: "the absence from the academic literature of any semiotically sophisticated and ethnographically rich understanding of brands is downright shocking" (332). His article thoroughly addresses this lack, and provides a thoughtful sounding board to which I will periodically return to address some of the confusion around the *Guerrillero Heroico*.

According to one strategist, "if brand names did not exist there would be no trustworthy marketplace" (Moore 2003, 338). One of the key elements of a brand has to do with its trustworthiness or credibility. To elaborate, Moore