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## A Trojan Horse? An icon of the anti-establishment at the Victoria & Albert Museum

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### Abstract

This article explores the independently curated exhibition, *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon*, which was on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 2006. It analyses the exhibition's interpretive approach, as well as the tensions between the exhibition's curator and institution. I focus, in the final instance, on the particular issues associated with the display of revolutionary material culture, as well as the phenomenon of communist kitsch. The article concludes by arguing that art and politics are inextricably linked in revolutionary material, and in derivatives thereof, including those pertaining to Che Guevara. Without interpretation of both aspects, the impact of the whole is diminished. For a satisfactory outcome, I contend, museums must be prepared to take a clear interpretive stance, and accept any criticism or controversy that follows by tackling the issues this type of art and material culture raises, or not at all.

**Key words:** representation, Victoria and Albert Museum, material culture, revolution, Che Guevara, interpretation

### Introduction

This article examines the touring exhibition, *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon*, which showed at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in 2006.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition aimed to explore the global appropriation of the image, *Guerillero Heroico*,<sup>2</sup> in the four decades following Che's death at the hands of the CIA and Bolivian security forces in 1967. The iconic and immortalizing image of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara was taken by the photographer Alberto Diaz Gutierrez, known as 'Korda'. It is frequently cited in both popular and scholarly contexts as one of the most reproduced images in the history of photography (see, amongst others, Quiroga 2005: 94; Casey 2009: 77; Guardiola-Rivera 2009: 248; Kaiser 2011: 317).<sup>3</sup>

What follows is a review article that critically engages with and analyses the interpretation developed for the exhibition. I use the exhibition as a jumping-off point for a discussion about the particular issues associated with the display of material pertaining to revolution in the national museum, which I contextualize by addressing the broader phenomenon of communist kitsch.<sup>4</sup> The article considers how successfully the exhibition realized the aims of its curator, Trisha Ziff, an 'independent' curator with no formal affiliation to either of the main institutions that sponsored the exhibition. I analyse the messages that were transmitted by the exhibition and the material on display. I also explore the political implications of displaying potentially controversial and polarizing material in order to interrogate the exhibition and supporting evidence to determine how the displayed objects were interpreted. I ask whether the exhibition presented material as ideologically neutered art objects, aesthetically neutralized objects of social history, or a combination of both. Beyond this, I examine if it is possible to display material culture pertaining to revolution without compromising both art and socio-political history.

### The image

The seminal photograph of Che was taken by Korda, a former fashion photographer, on 5 March 1960. The setting was a mass rally, addressed by Fidel Castro, at the funeral of more than 80 Cubans killed in an explosion on a French freighter, *Le Coubre*, docked in Havana Harbour. Fidel Castro, then Prime Minister of Cuba, believed this incident had been sanctioned by the CIA. Korda later passed one of the two photographs of Che taken on that day to the left-wing

Italian publisher, Gian-Giacomo Feltrinelli (Ziff 2006: 17). According to the usual narrative, Feltrinelli published Korda's photograph in *Paris Match* just prior to Che's assassination on 9 October 1967. However, Michael Casey (2009: 71) disputes this myth, claiming instead that the image had been reproduced on 'numerous' occasions inside and outside Cuba before 1967. The image was not widely known in Europe until the appearance of the Feltrinelli version of the original photograph in 1967 (see Casey 2009:71-2; 88-90).

The timing was serendipitous; the image of Che, and the values he stood for, appealed to the counterculture emerging at the time in response to the Vietnam War and growing anti-American sentiment in Europe. The late 1960s was, in Jonathan Green's words (2008), a singular moment in time. The emergence of the Che image coincided with pop art and the beginnings of global celebrity culture and, in the year following Che's death, his soon-to-be 'fetished' image (Guardiola-Rivera 2009: 236) was co-opted by the Left as a symbol of empowerment and opposition against the *status quo*. The cheap and infinitely reproducible poster became the image's primary vehicle. Many different versions were produced, and were used by the various radical groups fomenting unrest in late '60s Europe to raise money for their cause (Ziff 2008). Fidel Castro's rejection of international copyright law (Ziff 2008) had effectively placed the image in the public domain.<sup>5</sup> It was Jim Fitzpatrick's high-contrast, red and black *Ernesto 'Che' Guevara Lynch*<sup>6</sup> (several versions, 1967-69) that became *the* caricature, as Wallis (2006: 27) describes it:<sup>7</sup> the idolatry of Che was set in motion.

As the artist Gavin Turk argues, the Korda/Fitzpatrick image of Che has so infiltrated the popular consciousness that '[Y]ou only need key elements of the photo – the beret, the long hair, the position of the eyes (as with classical icons, looking up and to the right), a bit of beard – to make it function as a symbol' (Turk 2006). These are, in the words of Kunzle (1997: 26), 'a cartoon shorthand with "tabs of identity" and synecdoche'. Turk suggests that it is this aspect of the original image which has contributed to its continued success and (mis)use. The striking simplicity and immediacy of the image has lent itself to 'posterization' – that is, to repetition and mass reproduction helped by Korda's crop of the original image, which removed background elements and effectively ahistoricized the portrait (Casey 2008). This process of abstraction contributed to the building of broad appeal for the image, as did Che's ambiguous ethnicity in posterized form (Salas 2008). Che was charismatic and, with his tousled hair, leather jacket and piercing eyes, he fitted the rock star archetype, joining Jimi Hendrix, James Dean, Janice Joplin, *et al*, as poster children of the sixties. As Kunzle (1997: 49) reminds us, flowing hair and beards – ancient symbols of power and sexuality – became, in the mid-sixties, 'potent signs of separation from a mainstream culture... hirsuteness became a vogue for the dissident young who wanted to "let it all hang out"'. Thus, upon Che's death in October 1967, 'a myth sprang to life' (Kunzle 1997: 22).

What does it mean to display the 'essentialized' image of a complex revolutionary icon in a museum like the V&A? Jonathan Green (see Lotz 2006), Director of the California Museum of Photography (which co-developed the exhibition with the V&A), has uncompromisingly stated that there is 'a great irony in the way that anti-imperialist images of Che are surrounded here [in the V&A] by raped objects from world cultures and societies'. He goes on to say that 'a museum [although presumably not his own] may be frightened of... the radical ideas and change' that the Che image represents (Green cited by Lotz 2006). Was *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon*, as he suggests, 'a guerrilla show... a Trojan Horse' (see Lotz 2006)? Had an expression of 'radical politics' infiltrated the monolithic museum by stealth?

## The exhibition

The exhibition was housed at the V&A in a low-lit gallery in a mezzanine area off the grand entrance hall (the area now occupied by the Medieval and Renaissance Europe galleries). Posters, artworks, photographs, merchandizing, film and consumables were displayed against orange backgrounds, mounted on black, metal scaffolding. The exhibition ambience was utilitarian and functional. Backlit and vibrantly coloured text panels carried quotes from, amongst others, the journalist Sean O'Hagen and Cuban writer and historian, Edmundo Desnoes. Their words and the introductory text to each section addressed the commodification of the Che image and its continued revolutionary associations, and were reproduced in the free

gallery guide. Minimal interpretative material was provided alongside exhibits, aside from title, date, artist (where appropriate) and, on occasion, brief information about the maker, collector, or context of the object's production. This minimal approach may be understood as reflecting a curatorial presumption that visitors had prior knowledge of Che as an historical and political figure.

Large screen-printed banners using manipulated versions of a stylized rendering of Che's portrait were hung at the entrance and throughout the gallery. Smaller, similar images were affixed to columns and the stairwell leading to the exhibition space.<sup>8</sup> The design ethos may be interpreted as a conscious attempt to echo the familiar two-tone image of Che, upon which many of the objects on display also drew. Unobtrusive and minimalist, it reflected the classic art gallery-style hang, despite being removed from the ubiquitous 'white cube' in this V&A location. The arrangement of the exhibitionary space, and the through route that visitors were encouraged to take, highlighted a loosely chronological transformation of Che, from revolutionary, to deity, to consumerist icon.

### Politics displayed

The main challenge for the curator, Trisha Ziff, in achieving her aims for the exhibition, lay in the choice of the V&A as the exhibition's host institution in the UK. A national museum devoted to the collection and display of quality design, the V&A is widely regarded as conferring a certain credibility, if not validity, upon what it exhibits. It renders the ephemeral and popular 'significant' and 'acceptable', and has the potential to neutralize ideological meaning.

When an object enters the museum space it may be dehistoricized, divorced from its original purpose and social life (in this case, the Che image's role as a trope or revolution and resistance). Its meaning, to paraphrase Quirke (2007), is often 'anaesthetized'. Disengagement with and disavowal of politics from the aesthetic maintains a pretence of objectivity (Barnes 2009: 328). As Ashworth *et al* (2007: 111) describe, museums have a tendency to contain and marginalize. The process of 'museumification' may render 'deviance' (here, from the perceived mainstream ideological norm) politically irrelevant and *harmless* (Ashworth *et al* 2007: 75) and 'may be a device to avoid ideological conflict' (Ashworth *et al* 2007: 111).

The exhibits are presented as interesting for their antiquity, ingenuity, beauty or strangeness, but they possess no intrinsic ideological message of any significance to the present or the future. The viewer is not supposed to identify with the exhibit, or trace any significant connection between then and now, between "it and me".

(Ashworth *et al* 2007: 111)

This process of disconnection escalated the strain occurring between institutional practice and norms and the interpretive intentions of the independent curator such that tension came to overshadow the exhibition.

Ziff ran into conflict with the V&A, for example, over changes made to the interpretive ethos of the exhibition after it travelled to London from the California Museum of Photography, particularly in respect of the removal of much of the explanatory text she had written. She complained to *The Guardian*, '[T]he V&A have tried to turn it all into just a design image and remove the resonance from it all' (see Campbell 2006). But while Ziff's extended curatorial statement had been removed from the gallery space, much of the contextual interpretive material that included information about Che's career as a revolutionary fighter, and the story of Korda's original photograph, was posted on the exhibition mini website, or 'micro site' to use the V&A's own terminology. The online presence was, in fact, an integral component of the exhibition, and consistent with the institution's attention to digital dissemination and outreach.<sup>9</sup> Six years later, the site remains accessible, allowing the museum – through podcasts and additional background information – to maintain a sustainable, two-way communication with its audience.

Ziff's complaint is justified, however, on the grounds that this online material was not accessible in the gallery for visitors attending the physical exhibition. There was no guarantee that the audience would access, or even know about, the virtual exhibition micro-site in advance of, and possibly after, a physical visit. While museums may opt to place additional interpretive

material online to compensate for lack of space in the gallery, or to cater to the needs of a diverse audience, it is possible, in this case, that the decision to place much of the contextual material online was an act of self-censorship. One might suggest that the Internet, as a public, yet non-traditional means of display, is a less problematic platform by which to present potentially contentious material. While it would be remiss not to acknowledge the very genuine practicalities inherent in producing concise, accessible exhibition text for a non-specialist audience, given that a large proportion of the contextual information consigned to the digital offer was Ziff's commentary, one can comprehend her disappointment.

What most infuriated the curator were the changes allegedly made by the V&A to the opening night guest list. The institution vetoed the invitation extended to Gerry Adams, who was at the time the Sinn Féin MP for Belfast West, and a personal friend of Ziff's. Adams wondered if Che, himself descendant of Irish immigrants, would have been permitted to attend the opening (Campbell 2006). Indeed, it has been revealed that, in a letter Ziff received from Mark Jones, the then Director of the V&A, the museum had a policy not to invite individuals affiliated with political parties (Campbell 2006).<sup>10</sup> However, the museum had no such concerns about inviting the then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, to the opening of a '60s fashion exhibition held on the same night. The two exhibitionary subjects are linked by their emphasis on a shared historical era, of course, but they represented very different challenges for a public institution seeking to avoid controversy and negative attention. It is important to remember that the 1997 ceasefire announced by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was less than ten years old at the time of the exhibition, and the memory of its bombing campaign on the mainland was fresh in the British public's consciousness. It seems reasonable to suggest that the V&A's reluctance for Gerry Adams to attend the opening was most likely connected with his presumed political affiliations, rather than an institutional policy about the appropriateness of politicians as VIP guests. It is not an enormous leap to suggest that if the V&A had been comfortable in censoring the guest list for the exhibition, it would have no qualms about neutralizing evidence of radical ideology within the exhibition as a precaution against negative attention.<sup>11</sup>

The tensions over the guest list demonstrated discord between the wishes of the curator and the PR considerations of the institution. The V&A might argue that it is, first and foremost, an institution dedicated to the research, collection and display of good design,<sup>12</sup> where good design is assessed through a judgement-laden set of changing, yet largely accepted and unchallenged values that have been employed and accepted by the museum since its inception (see Barringer 1998: 14).<sup>13</sup> In the V&A's iteration of the exhibition, ideologically resonant material was exhibited without due recognition of its inherent function and meaning. It appears that the museum made a conscious choice to censor the interpretive material supplied by the curator and which had been used in other versions of the exhibition.

While it might be a stretch to assert, as the Fun-da-mental front man Aki Nawaz controversially did in 2006 (the same year as the exhibition), that Che's modern day equivalent might be Osama bin Laden (Nawaz 2006), in his own time, Che Guevara was a polarizing figure, variously perceived as freedom fighter, or terrorist, depending upon the ideological standpoint of the observer. What is not disputed is that he was a proponent of armed, violent struggle. As Richard Gott (2006) – one of the few journalists present at the display of his body in 1967 – has observed, Che was also 'cold and harsh, preoccupied and uncaring, driven by an internal flame that had little time for the sensitivities of others. He was, after all, an exponent and practitioner of revolutionary violence.' However, the exhibition presented little contextualizing historical information about Che's career as a socialist revolutionary, and it failed to explore how his image had transmogrified from guerrilla fighter to symbol of 'cool'.

The exhibition had other gaps and shortfalls. It could have more fully analysed the popular attraction of the iconography associated with Che (his beard, long hair, beret and the star upon it), or the mythology of Che as revolutionary everyman and sainted martyr. It may have more deeply investigated how and why the symbolism associated with Korda's portrait of Che has been appropriated in strata far removed from his radical politics, where his dogma and values are alien. Also, as an exhibition in a mainstream national museum, it would have offered an appropriate vehicle for exploring why Che's image has achieved a veneer of mainstream acceptance, to such an extent that, albeit controversially, the Churches Advertising Network (CAN), on behalf of the Church of England, could publish advertising posters for Easter 1999

(a bearded and crown of thorns-bedecked Christ) and Christmas 2005 (infant Christ) that drew upon the aesthetic of Fitzpatrick's Che. Yet the exhibition, certainly as it appeared at the V&A, did none of these things satisfactorily. Each of these points were only cursorily addressed in the gallery space. The absence of richly interpretive material, of the kind that may have been available at the exhibition's other venues, stymied the curator's radical intentions. The museum also overlooked, or ignored the crux of Ziff's intended narrative on the consumerization of the Che image by giving visitors the opportunity to purchase the very type of Che-themed souvenirs that were critiqued by the exhibition.

### Che and Consumerism

When Dorfman asks, '[I]s it conceivable that [Che] can be comfortably transmogrified into a symbol of [non-specific] rebellion precisely because he is no longer dangerous' (Dorfman 1999), I answer yes. This interpretation can help to explain the psychology at work when someone chooses to wear a T-shirt emblazoned with the image of Che. The wearer is engaging in a symbolic dialogue with the rest of their milieu and wider society. For many, the act of wearing or decorating oneself with the iconography of revolution may operate as a way in which they can 'speak back' to an adopted cultural context, whereby 'speaking back' functions as an act of defiance, however petty, against perceived mainstream Western cultural norms (see Pearce 2005: 323; Barnes 2011: 317). The impact of revolutionary icons worn or displayed in this way operates as *bricolage* (see Hebdige 1979: 102-6), or a trope of revolution. The origin of the symbolism, its original meaning, is not necessarily as important as the self-conscious message about oneself that the owner or wearer wishes to broadcast, particularly when iconography and ideology from differing temporal and geographical contexts are juxtaposed.

In popular contexts, Che's image has become, like the art and design of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and visual iconography of the USSR, little more than revolutionary kitsch, where it has become devoid of its original, albeit multiple, meanings and subject to the viewer's/ consumer's (in the broadest sense of the word) cultural background and personal ideologies (Barnes 2009: 261). Manufacturers may believe that, by aligning themselves with the image of Che, they are transmitting a carefully targeted message of the power of individual agency to ethical or idealistic consumers. As Poyner (2006: 40) comments: '[this phenomenon] is part of a game global brands play with a visually sophisticated audience that takes ironic pleasure from the gap between revolution and commerce, and imagines it remains somehow untainted by consumerist values'. Some may be uneasy with this juxtaposition of revolution and consumerism, which seems to contradict and dilute Che's values and those of the original consumers of the image, among them Korda himself, who decried the association of his iconic image with what he regarded as frivolous products.<sup>14</sup>

My impression that the exhibition ultimately contributed to, rather than challenged, the commodification of the Che image, was augmented by the items on sale at the exit. The most successful aspect of the exhibition was the exploration of the commercial (mis)use and appropriation of the Che image, through a selection of objects including Che-themed wrist watches, soft toys and alcoholic drinks. But the strength of this message was ultimately foiled by the museum's own commercial activities. Visitors could only leave the exhibition via an outpost of the museum's shop, where they could purchase revolutionary lip gloss, badges, stickers, finger puppets and other Che-themed merchandise. Ziff criticized the V&A for this juxtaposition (Campbell 2006). However, one could argue that that this was the natural conclusion to the exhibition, following the narrative from man, to icon, to the saint, to the image. Visitors were thus encouraged to play an interactive role in the symbolic 'selling out' of Che. Indeed, Ziff was later to describe the experience of putting on the exhibition at the V&A as 'another [Che] T-shirt...each venue is its own T-shirt, each with its own form of censorship and its own interpretation of what Che represents' (Ziff, cited by Casey 2009: 265). So, did this exhibition do anything to rectify this phenomenon, or to encourage a deeper understanding of the man in the image amongst its consumers?

Ultimately, although the exhibition did engage with the deification and commodification of Che, little was done to explore the irony inherent in these processes. Again, one could argue that this approach reflected the driving curatorial message behind the exhibition. After all, it was

about the image rather than the man. It was, in effect, an attempt to comment on the twin processes of popularization and commercialization. But, to be effective, this approach would have required not only pre-existing knowledge on the audience's part, but for that audience (comprised of, we might suppose, casual visitors and tourists)<sup>15</sup> to be open and prepared to accept a deep, philosophical reflection on the subject matter.

### Concluding thoughts

What does an analysis of *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon* reveal about the challenges associated with displaying material artefacts that are both politically and symbolically charged? Is it possible to present an interpretation of this material without compromising established tropes of art and political history? Did the V&A actively seek to avoid controversy and negative media attention that had the potential to foment bad will? As I have shown, the institution certainly neutralized the ideologically edged commentary provided by Ziff. It revealed, through its awkward handling of the guest list for the opening celebration, – that it was concerned about the potential for the exhibition to become the focus of negative and challenging attention. This may have been connected to related concerns that the opening of the exhibition could have been exploited by individuals, or groups, or used for political emphasis.

Ironically, given the curator's vision of the exhibition as a commentary upon the commercialization of the Che image, the museum made available to visitors a wide range of items to purchase as souvenirs, as it commonly does for all of its temporary exhibitions. That this had the potential to feed the myths the exhibition ostensibly sought to halt, was missed or overlooked, which meant that the exhibition was ultimately an empty experience. Yes, it was eye-catching, glossy and diverting, but it did little, at least in the form in which it appeared in London, to counteract what it professed to challenge. The danger in privileging form over function is that the overall thrust of the interpretive narrative comes across as superficial and flimsy, and this was, indeed, the result. While the intention may have been honourable – to raise the profile of and to confer museum-worthy value upon a particular manifestation of graphic design and pop culture – the failure to engage critically or deeply with the meanings inherent in the ideologically rich objects on display did them little justice.

The separation of politics and art that occurred in the exhibition was not inevitable. An earlier exhibition of Che posters curated by David Kunzle in 1997 at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, for example, demonstrated a neat way of presenting an 'art' exhibition, without shying away from the political implications of the material on show. That exhibition clearly recognized the problematics of mounting such an exhibition. '...The primary focus on Che... leaves us open to the charge of iconicizing and mythicizing Che to the detriment of the message' (Kunzle 1997: 21). The absences in the message were made explicit by Kunzle in the exhibition catalogue (if not the exhibition itself) when he said: '[O]ur intention here is to illustrate and analyse icon and myth, and extract some essentials of the message, without engaging Che's ideology in detail or as a whole' (Kunzle 1997: 21). This brief statement clearly positioned Kunzle's exhibition as an exploration of the myth, not the man. Had the apparent aims of *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon* been as clear as this, some of my criticisms and feelings of uncertainty may have been unwarranted.

Che Guevara, the man and the myth, continues to inspire youth culture, even if the original ideological associated with his image has long since dissipated in many global contexts. The Che image-myth has become firmly installed in Western (perhaps global) popular culture as a trope for anti-establishmentarianism. As Kunzle puts it (1997: 21), Che appeals to our nostalgia for revolution in an age when optimism is a rare gift, and pessimism and apathy paralyze too many. Museums must recognize that, in the case of propagandist and political art, ideology and aesthetics are linked. The effectiveness of the message is contingent upon the appeal, immediacy and accessibility of the image. For a satisfactory outcome, museums must be comfortable about and be prepared to accept any criticism or controversy that accompanies display and tackle the issues this type of art and material culture raises, or avoid it altogether.

Half a decade later, an analysis of exhibition remains relevant to museum praxis. Che Guevara, as an historical figure and posterized image, continues to be referenced in contemporary culture. Following the success of Walter Salles' *Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), Stephen Soderberg's 2008–9 two-part biopic starring Benicio del Toro as the eponymous *Che*

found an international audience<sup>16</sup> and was well-received by critics and award committees.<sup>17</sup> The film demonstrated that Che still had pulling power some four decades after his death. In the same year, Trisha Ziff co-directed (with Luiz Lopez) the documentary *Chevolution*, which traces similar themes to those she had explored in the original version of the exhibition (see Grove 2008). Also in 2008, Shephard Fairey's 'Hope' poster, featuring Barack Obama, rendered in a style reminiscent of Jim Fitzpatrick's Che, was adopted by the soon-to-be president's supporters during the U.S. presidential campaign in 2008, becoming, what the art critic Peter Schjeldahl, writing in *The New Yorker*, has described as 'the most efficacious American political illustration since "Uncle Sam Wants You"' (Schjeldahl 2009). Like the Che image before it, the Obama Hope poster has been widely parodied and referenced in popular culture on and off-line. Fairey is resigned to this (Fairey 2008), and actively explores the phenomenon in his work. In *Chevolution* (2008) he explains that 'as soon as something resonates, it will be exploited and may be appropriated by anyone for any cause and purpose.

Furthermore, the last couple of years have brought a revival in grass-roots activism and protest at home and revolution abroad. The Che image and its variations have gained a renewed currency globally – in relation to the unrest spreading through the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring as well as in relation to the primarily North American 'Occupy' movement – as tropes of opposition to convey dissatisfaction with the *status quo*. But these contemporary movements are inspiring the production of new icons of revolution.<sup>18</sup> If institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum are to engage effectively with this material, the tension between art and politics that I have identified in this paper will need to be recognized and explored. One way forward is suggested by a more recent exhibition of politically charged material.

In 2008, the V&A's favoured modernist, aesthetic interpretative approach was partly deconstructed by the temporary exhibition *Cold War Modern* (25 September 2008 – 11 January 2009), that explored art and design during the years 1945–1970 on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The culmination of a four-year research project by curators Jane Pavitt and David Crowley (Pavitt, pers. comm. 2009)<sup>19</sup>, the central premise of the exhibition was that '[A]rt and design were not peripheral symptoms of politics during the Cold War: they played a central role in representing and sometimes challenging the dominant political and social ideas of the age'.<sup>20</sup> The exhibition reflected the material manifestations that characterized the period on both sides of the ideological divide, highlighting the sometimes-symbiotic relationship between East and West.

Although the curator Jane Pavitt has maintained that, given the context of the V&A, *Cold War Modern* was not 'a show on the material culture of the Cold War', and that instead it represented 'the idea of cold war modernity as a series of projections about future possible societies' (Pavitt, pers. comm. 2009)<sup>21</sup>, the exhibition did, in my view, represent a departure for the V&A in its previous representation of political culture. Specifically, objects and their interpretation were placed within a historiographic, loosely chronological narrative, which engaged with the politics and ideology inherent in the production and cultural meaning of those objects. For me, this poses an interesting question. In the intervening years between *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon* and *Cold War Modern*, had the V&A found a more effective approach for dealing with political material and become more comfortable with the presentation of political culture within its walls, or was the subject matter of the former singularly problematic? Perhaps Che remains such a potent and conflicting icon that we are still not sure what to say about him.

Recognition of the changes in the approach, form and emphasis of many exhibitions developed and shown in the period since *Che Guevara: Revolutionary and Icon* might encourage us, I suggest, to revisit the accuracy of Jonathan Green's contention that the exhibition was a 'Trojan Horse' in the space of the modernist museum. If we are to believe Ziff, the museum moderated – that is compromised – her ideological message. 'Museumification' seemed to have excised all power from the image. Combined with the lack of in-gallery interpretation, the museum effectively homogenized and disempowered the Che image, and packaged it up as the very consumerist icon the exhibition professed to critique. The result was not a 'trojan horse'. Far from it.



## Notes

- 1 The exhibition (under a different name) was first shown at the Museum of Photography, California in 2005, and then travelled to the International Center of Photography, New York; Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City; and finally the V&A. It was organised by UCR/California Museum of Photography and made and additionally funded by Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City, the Anglo Mexican Foundation and Zonezero.com (V&A, n.d.). The V&A was not involved in the development of the exhibition. This is in contrast with the other venues, which were.
- 2 Diana Diaz believes that her father attached the name 'Guerillico Heroico' to the image following Che's death. The year following his assassination was declared by Castro as the 'Year of the Guerillico Heroico' in commemoration (Diaz 2008).
- 3 Korda believed the image was the most reproduced in history (cited by Hernandez-Reguant 2008: 267), and while Ziff reminds us that this claim is difficult to substantiate (Ziff 2005 -[http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/exhibitions/che/essay\\_001.htm](http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/exhibitions/che/essay_001.htm), accessed 31 October 2011), the statement 'the world's most reproduced photograph' is used as the tagline on publicity materials for 'Chevolution', the documentary directed by Ziff in 2008.
- 4 Kitsch, as codified in 1939 by Clement Greenberg, refers to decorative objects which are popular in a derogative sense: unrefined, frequently mass-(re)produced, vulgar, overly garish and sentimental, designed to appeal to those in possession of unsophisticated taste and thusly, cynically produced for the sole aim of financial gain (see Barnes 2009: 259). Contemporarily, the boundaries between high and low are more fluid, the formerly derogatory term kitsch has been rectified: the aesthetic of kitsch is consumed from a position of detached, but knowing irony (Barnes 2009: 261). Communist kitsch specifically, was a term popularised by Milan Kundera in his 1982 (1984 in English-language translation) novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, to refer to the material culture of Soviet propaganda.
- 5 Hernandez-Reguant (2008) gives a detailed account of Korda's successful bid to achieve copyright over the original image. Fitzpatrick initially gave away copies of his poster and deliberately made his version copyright-free so that it would spread and 'breed' consciousness (Fitzpatrick 2008). However, reports in 2011 suggested that he had decided to protect the image to block 'crass commercial' use of it (see Humphries 2011).
- 6 The 'Lynch' makes reference of Che's Irish ancestry.
- 7 Fitzpatrick claims that Korda gave him credit for making the image famous. See <http://www.aleksandramir.info/texts/fitzpatrick.html> (18 February 2009).
- 8 Photography was not permitted in the exhibition and I have been unable to source official images. This image (linked to with permission by the photographer) shows the stylised 'Ches' at the entrance to the gallery: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bryceedwards/228240706/> (accessed 14 May 2012).
- 9 Themed micro-sites have and continue to be a key component of V&A exhibitions since at least *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms* (1999) (for a discussion of this micro, site see Nightingale and Swallow 2003: 67). The joint managing director of a digital agency appointed by the V&A in 2007 to produce micro-sites for the exhibitions *The Golden Age of Couture* and *The Art of Lee Miller*, commented that 'The web is playing an increasingly important part in the whole exhibition experience and we'll be using a variety of new techniques to engage with visitors... We shouldn't view microsites as just another marketing tool but try to maximise their potential as an extension of the event of exhibition itself' (Stuart Avery, cited by Donohue, 2007). One assumes that this ethos was shared by the commissioning institution.
- 10 Casey (2009: 265) supports this version of events.

- <sup>11</sup> Indeed, the exhibition, in the form in which it appeared in Los Angeles, was subject to protests by anti-Castro Cuban exiles (Campbell 2006).
- <sup>12</sup> The V&A's current mission statement reads 'As the world's leading museum of art and design, the V&A enriches people's lives by promoting the practice of design and increasing knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the designed world'. See <http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/a/about-us/> (accessed 28 May 2012).
- <sup>13</sup> <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-mission-and-objectives/> (accessed 31 October 2011)
- <sup>14</sup> See Wallis (2006: 23-31) for a full discussion of Korda's objections to the usage of his photograph and the various steps he took to recover control over its dissemination.
- <sup>15</sup> V&A research into audience demographics for the period April 2004–March 2005 indicates that nearly half of all visitors to the museum (49.26 per cent) were non-affiliated adults, that is people aged 16 and over, who were not part of groups, adult learning programmes, or expressed a professional or specialist interest. Of these, 25 per cent were from Greater London, 21 per cent of the rest of the UK, and nearly 21 per cent from North America. For details, see [http://www.vam.ac.uk/res\\_cons/research/visitor/visitors/audiences/index.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/res_cons/research/visitor/visitors/audiences/index.html) (15 January 2011).
- <sup>16</sup> To date, the film (both parts) has grossed \$1,778,287 worldwide since its release on 12 December 2008 (figure provided by *Box Office Mojo*, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=che.ht>, accessed 03 November 2011).
- <sup>17</sup> Benecio del Toro won the Best Actor award at Cannes in 2008, and the film, and its director, were nominated for a number of other awards, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0892255/awards> (accessed 03 November 2011).
- <sup>18</sup> See, for example, anti-Gaddafi murals in Libya and 'crossed-out' images of Syrian President Assad, <http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/08/libyan-street-art-freedom-defiance-and-troubling-signs/>, accessed 03 November 2011; [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/19/arab-protest-posters-political-art- n\\_931577.html#s333746](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/19/arab-protest-posters-political-art- n_931577.html#s333746), accessed 03 November 2011. An unconfirmed work by Banksy, which satirises the UK Government's bail-out of British banks in the economic crisis, appeared at the Occupy LSX encampment at the end of October 2011 (<http://londonist.com/2011/10/occupy-st-pauls-banksy-in-pictures.php>, accessed 03 November 2011).
- <sup>19</sup> Jane Pavitt, email to the author (February 24th 2009).
- <sup>20</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum (2008), *Cold War Modern*, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/microsites/cold-warmodern/> (02 June 2009).
- <sup>21</sup> Jane Pavitt, email to the author (February 24th 2009).

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