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‘Un mito es una imagen participada’: Che Guevara in Lezama Lima’s *La expresión americana*

*La realidad y la irrealidad están tan entrelazadas que apenas distingo lo sucedido, el suceso actual
y las infinitas posibilidades del suceder.* José Lezama Lima

Following a series of lectures in Havana in 1957, José Lezama Lima published the essays in *La expresión americana*. From these essays we can arrive at a theory of history that is both epistemological, in that it concerns the interpretative process by which we understand history, and socially pragmatic, in that it elaborates a vision of history that leads to a sense of cultural identity. In establishing the historical platform upon which his theories are based, Lezama explored a handful of key figures in American (of the Americas) history as representative of key movements in American historical identity, ranging from Inca mythical figures through baroque *mestizo* artisans, the romantic figures of Fray Servando and Simón Rodríguez, José Martí, Melville and Whitman. Lezama proposed that history is understood through the mytho-poetic image, and that such a vision of the image serves as the foundation for culture and cultural identity.

Since publication this slim volume has generated a steady flow of critical appraisal, positioning the work within the extensive canon of Latin American essays concerning Latin or Pan-American identity, charted by Irlemar Chiampi as: ‘de Sarmiento a Martí, pasando por Bilbao y Lastarria, en el siglo XIX; de Rodó a Martínez Estrada [...] de Vasconcelos, Ricardo Rojas, Pedro Henríquez Ureña y Mariátegui’ (Chiampi 2001: 9). Scholarly works on *La expresión americana* have been concerned primarily with explaining and interpreting the overall meaning of the essays. This is unsurprising owing to the fact that the language employed by Lezama is characteristically dense, pithy with metaphor, replete with allusions and references from a variety of locations and historical periods, and above all, complex in its argumentation. It is not the intention of the present study to add to the healthy body of research

concerning the essential *meaning* of the essays. What appears lacking in an appraisal of Lezama's essays is the following question – if the theoretical implications of *La expresión americana* concern the interpretation and understanding of history, and the establishment of a sense of cultural identity, can we see such a theoretical design as being apt or accurate in an understanding of modern history? Does Lezama's emphasis placed upon 'la imagen' and 'el mito' serve in any pragmatic function when we address Cuban revolutionary history?

In order to address these concerns this article examines *La expresión americana*, exploring the proposed theory of cultural history, before moving the focus onto the figure of Ernesto Guevara, examining in certain key areas both within the context of Cuban history and without, how the character defined by historicity has been imbued with a mytho-poetic image akin to the model found in Lezama's work. This will lead to a consideration of the myth-making process as similar to the process of 'mythologisation' outlined by Roland Barthes, and will inevitably lead to an appraisal of the figure of Guevara as a product of such a process. As a result, it will be possible to reconsider *La expresión americana* from a greater social perspective than has hitherto been undertaken.

The date of the delivery and publication of Lezama's essays is an important and yet often overlooked factor in an understanding of their social importance. To summarise briefly, José Lezama Lima, editor of the important artistic journal *Orígenes*, and key figure in the assembly of cultural figures who contributed to the journal,¹ delivered the first of the lectures in February 1957, just one month after New York Times journalist Herbert Matthews had clandestinely interviewed Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra and had awakened excited interest in the rebel leader and his group not only in the US, but, importantly, in Havana; and just one month before Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil, led by José Antonio Echeverría, led the storming of the presidential palace in Havana. This was the same year that Cintio Vitier was to deliver and later

¹ '[...]' entre los cuales se cuentan Cintio Vitier, Eliseo Diego, Ángel Gatzelu, Fina García Marruz, Amelia Peláez, René Portocarrero, Mariano Rodríguez, Julián Orbón [...]' (Chiampi 2001: 12).

publish *Lo cubano en la poesía*, outlining some similar concerns of the importance of *la poesía* in cultural history. 1957, moreover, and significant for this study, was the year that Roland Barthes published the collected essays concerning the semiological process of myth creation in contemporary society entitled *Mythologies*.

Although a number of scholars address the historical position of Lezama's lectures and publications, and although certain scholarly attention has been drawn towards the revolutionary (in political terms) concerns of the essays, there is a tendency to decontextualise the works within a poetical, aesthetic, non-historic time at once conducive to the poetical language of the essays. This, as stated, is both necessary and understandable, owing to the dominant epistemological concerns that Lezama placed upon the aesthetic – concerns that reach their 'summa' in his poetic novel *Paradiso*.² Furthermore, beyond the poetic language, the essays of *La expresión americana* also analyse artistic figures more than the political or military, culminating a discourse that has absorbed in its circumference Columbus, Eliot, Kondori and Martí in a discussion of Picasso, Stravinsky, Joyce, *Martín Fierro*, Whitman, Melville and Kafka.³ Furthermore, Lezama's critical and theoretical sources are drawn predominantly from a European past, described by Rafael Rojas (1994) as 'la escuela anterior, es decir, a la morfología de las culturas practicada por Jacob Burckhardt, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee y Alfred Weber'.

Within the development of the Latin American essay as a cultural phenomenon, Lezama's essays occupy a hazy position that are neither the socially pragmatic essays of, say, Sarmiento, whose works mirrored if not fuelled both initiatives of immigration and ethnic, territorial wars; the mobilising Marxist works of Mariátegui, the ethnographic focus of Fernando Ortiz, or the post-revolutionary works of, for example, Retamar, whose *Calibán* has, in many respects, served as the cultural/political manifesto of the Cuban Revolution. *La expresión americana*,

² Lezama, in Fossey 1969: 17

³ Although Fray Servando and Simón Rodríguez are political figures, they appear in *La expresión americana* in a mythical time that figuratively allies them to pre-Columbian mythological characters of Xibalbá and others of the *Popul Vuh*.

with its prodigious bounds back into mythical, classical, pre- and post-Colombian history, and its essential poetic language, is harder to position within and in relation to particular social movements. Critical attention has addressed the social/political possibilities of *La expresión americana* only, it would seem, in passing. Irlemar Chiampi explores the political climate into which the essays emerged, concentrating on the mobilised yet non-militant position of the *Orígenes* group, and in particular on the provocative use of the adjective *americana* in an ambience of US-Cuban hostility (2001: 12-13). This analysis is repeated (essentially verbatim) in Mataix (2005). Livon-Grosman's introductory essay to a selection of translations of Lezama's work concentrates on the possible parities between *La expresión americana* and Revolutionary thought, suggesting that: '*La expresión americana* can at times be read as a precedent to the Revolution's model, and perhaps it even helped to negotiate his [Lezama's] relation with the revolutionary establishment' (2005: xx). Emilio Bejel, meanwhile, projects the theoretical framework of *La expresión americana* upon the Cuban Revolution: 'en el sistema lezamiano, la Revolución Cubana de 1959 constituye otra gran era de la imagen en Latinoamérica' (1991: 136). This is an intriguing perspective that requires a fuller and more thorough investigation. Furthermore, any attempt to interpret the social implications of the essay with relation to biography is inevitably fraught with the problematic of the polarising bias characteristic of texts dealing with the Cuban Revolution. Cabrera Infante, for example, in the section *Vidas para leerlas* of the collection *Mea Cuba* and with an outspoken anti-revolutionary agenda, depicts a wretched Lezama struggling not least to write but to survive in post-revolutionary Havana (1992: 346); whereas Cuban novelist and journalist Lisandro Otero (2001) depicts a grateful Lezama whose prolific creativity and limitless publishing opportunities owe everything to the bounty of the Revolution. A more balanced approach can, however, be offered by Salvador Bueno (1994: 395) Cintio Vitier (in Santí 1984: 180-182), and Bernáldez (1976: 660-662). Indeed, the ties (and lack of) between Lezama and the Revolution are a fascinating and scarcely explored area, but which fall outside the remit of this current

study. In sum, therefore, numerous forces work upon *La expresión americana* to ensure that scholarly attention remains focused on the aesthetic, poetic concerns of the essays, and not on the social and the political.

However, a general consensus of critical views of the essays has succeeded in teasing out an essential working theory that, although still glistening with a poetic sheen, can be examined practically within a cultural and social context. Julio Ortega stands as one of the first to appraise *expresión* as forming a more pragmatic ‘filosofía de cultura’ (1979: 66). Indeed Ortega’s brief yet brilliant study identifies not only the epistemological dimension of the essays, as ‘una forma de conocer’ and as ‘un discurso de discursos’, but, moreover, their practical socio-political perspective as an issue that ‘pertenece ya a otro discurso: el del destino socio-político de una comunidad hispanoamericana de naciones, dentro de las pautas del colonialismo y la dependencia’ (1979: 67). This is an interesting line of analysis, as the interface between what is commonly viewed as an essentially poetic discourse and a working theory of culture is brought into focus, revealing that the two perspectives are indeed part of the same process. Primarily this is due to the fact that Lezama, in narrating events and characters of American history, is declaring that the individual and the collective understanding of history are based upon a process of interpretation. There can be no history without someone to interpret the history. In this sense, it becomes clear that *La expresión americana* forms an integral part of Lezama’s *sistema poético* which, as he describes to Fossey (1969: 17), finds its most resolute exploration in the novel *Paradiso*. This inevitably aligns the discourse of history with that of fiction, described by Ulloa & Ulloa as ‘borrar las barreras entre lo histórico y lo ficticio’ (1998: 378) – a problematic issue when one is confronted with establishing the *truth* of a historical event. Yet this is precisely the philosophical and epistemological platform upon which Lezama bases his poetic concerns of history, and is a perspective that Lezama shares in many respects with Borges. This poetic perspective of history shifts the focus away from the concrete historical event onto the process of narrating and reading – that’s to say, history moves from

historicity to the transfer of a message, and thus it becomes a semiotic process. Of course, with this attention shifted onto the signifying process, the historical text can be manipulated by the addresser in order to influence the reception of the text by the addressee – a process that in political contexts could be deemed propaganda.⁴ Such manipulative designs are not immediate concerns of Lezama. Instead, as Chiampi details, Lezama explores the creative, generative perspective of the historical process:

Si la imagen participa de la historia, si ésta ha de determinarse como un tejido entregado por la imagen, Lezama deberá asumir necesariamente que ella se torne una ficción del sujeto y no una exposición objetiva del hecho americano. [...] Lezama no pretende descalificar la veracidad de la imagen sino traer el historicismo al plano del lenguaje. [...] Lezama invocará que todo discurso histórico es, por la propia imposibilidad de reconstruir la verdad de los hechos, una ficción, una exposición poética, un producto necesario de la imaginación del historiador. Se encuentra afectado, podríamos decir, por aquel *próton pseudos*, o yerro fundador de todo acto historiante que consiste en valorar el pasado con los puntos de vista del presente. Así, si la historia y la poesía se confunden en la misma “mentira poética”, ¿qué puede restar verdad a la operación del logos poético? (Chiampi 2001: 16-17)

The answer to Chiampi’s question lies in the fact that Lezama is not proposing a cultural theory to be enacted – there is no *manifesto* or call to arms outlined in *La expresión americana*. The essential drive is the description of the process *as it happens*. In this respect, the essays of *expresión* demonstrate that the process of interpretation is the same whether one is presented with a historical or a poetic text – as in both cases the meaning of the text becomes, in a basic semiological process, an interaction between the text and the interpretative spirit of the reader. Lezama himself recognises that the emphasis that he places upon the process and not the content of knowledge can be equated with the epistemological concerns of Structuralist thought:

He sido un lector voraz y simpatizo mucho con la afirmación de los estructuralistas – que dice que en todo lector existe la posibilidad y el deseo de escribir la obra que lee. De tal manera, y eso es lo maravilloso de la cultura, una obra tiene infinidad de autores. (in Bianchi Ross 2001: 130)

⁴ See: Rowlandson 2007.

This ‘sympathy’ that he recognises with Structuralism opens the scope of *expresión* into wider disciplines, as Lezama views the interpretation of all texts, of any discourse, as being the same process; and he boldly explains this process as the opening lines of the first essay, ‘Mitos y cansancio clásico’:

¿qué es lo difícil? [...] Es la forma de devenir en que un paisaje va hacia un sentido, una interpretación o una sencilla hermenéutica, para ir después hacia su reconstrucción, que es en definitiva lo que marca su eficacia o desuso, su fuerza ordenancista o su apagado eco, que es su visión histórica. (Lezama 2001: 49)

Emphasis is placed here not upon the historical event, but upon the interpretation of it – its reconstruction – and as Lezama explains, it is this interpretation that will determine its ‘eficacia o desuso’. Periods of history that fail to awaken in the interpreter the awe of *la imago* fail to achieve the poetical resonance that we see characterised in the historical reconstruction of *La expresión americana*.⁵ Similarly, *la imago* itself becomes the *animistic* heart of the poetic (and historic) moment: ‘La fuerza de urdimbre y la gravitación caracterizan ese espacio contrapunteado por la *imago*, que le presta la *extensión* hasta donde ese espacio tiene fuerza animista en relación con esas entidades’ (2001: 54).⁶ Furthermore, it is not simply the historical moment that becomes the interactive text to be interpreted; a similar *signifying process* takes place converting the ‘espacio gnóstico’ that is ‘naturaleza’ into the defining text that is ‘paisaje’.

Much has been written on this process of transformation from nature to landscape, so some brief summarising points will be sufficient to explain it. Nature itself is the unwritten text that awaits the creative participation of the subject to transform it into a meaningful entity, and by extension into a cultural construct. In the essay *Confluencias*, the final of the 1970 publication *La cantidad hechizada*, Lezama outlines this process of interaction:

⁵ ‘Si una cultura no logra crear un tipo de imaginación, si eso fuera posible, en cuanto sufriese el acarreo cuantitativo de los milenios sería toscamente indescifrable’ (Lezama 2003: 58).

⁶ Although Lezama’s use of the term *imago* can be interpreted through the psychological framework of Jung’s treatment of the term, insofar as the emphasis is placed upon the subject endowing the perceived object with a determining value or meaning, let it suffice here simply to label Lezama’s *imago* as the poetic image.

¿Qué es la sobrenaturaleza? La penetración de la imagen en la naturaleza engendra la sobrenaturaleza. En esa dimensión no me canso de repetir la frase de Pascal que fue una revelación para mí, “como la verdadera naturaleza se ha perdido, todo puede ser naturaleza”; la terrible fuerza afirmativa de esa frase, me decidió a colocar la imagen en el sitio de la naturaleza perdida de esa manera frente al determinismo de la naturaleza, el hombre responde con el total arbitrio de la imagen. Y frente al pesimismo de la naturaleza perdida, la invencible alegría en el hombre de la imagen reconstruida. [...] No se manifiesta la sobrenaturaleza tan sólo por la intervención del hombre en la naturaleza, tanto el hombre como la naturaleza, cada uno por su propio riesgo, concurren a la sobrenaturaleza. (1970: 441-2)

Herein lies the epistemological dimension of the creative interpretation of both landscape and history. The subjective interaction with nature becomes a hermeneutic process – one of interpreting – and such a process is integrally linked to the processes by which we gain knowledge. This epistemological perspective is detailed by Gustavo Pérez Firmat:

This opposition between nature and culture is mediated by a third term, *paisaje* (landscape). Landscape is the product of the subject’s intervention in nature, an intervention that is not necessarily physical or material. Indeed it seems primarily perceptual, for it consists of an act of apprehension, of framing, of fitting objects and events into a cognitive field that renders them suitable for human consumption. [...] Landscape is a second nature constituted by the activity of the metaphorical subject and which includes both natural phenomena and cultural facts. [...] The purpose of hermeneutic operations is to fabricate nature, and fabricated nature is second nature or, more simply, landscape. Landscape in turn creates culture. (1990: 319/20)

With this emphasis placed upon the creative force of interpretation upon the historical and the geographical process, and with these considerations explored above, how do we shift attention from the abstract theorising to a more pragmatic view of culture? In order to address this question, the figure of Ernesto Guevara can be called into focus in order to analyse the degree by which readers/interpreters of the Guevara biography follow a similar path of creative transformation that we have seen outlined by Lezama in *La expresión americana*.

Julio Ortega describes Lezama’s process: ‘[la] historicidad se revela mejor en este mecanismo de desconstrucción de los códigos culturales hegemónicos. Nuestra cultura, por ello, estaría siempre elaborándose como el discurso que se refiere a sí mismo al producirse

como tal' (1979: 69). Cultural identity is *un sujet en procès*, determined by the subjective creative interpretation of history and geography in the affirmation of the cultural narrative – and as Lezama explores in great depth, one integral feature of this affirmation is the mythic narrative. Lezama clarifies myth essentially as the extended vision of *la imagen*, a more rotund assertion of the raising of a historical moment into the collective imagination: 'Un mito es una imagen participada y una imagen es un mito que comienza su aventura, que se particulariza para irradiar de nuevo'.⁷ It is upon this very concept of myth that we can find the clear crossover between the theoretical aspect of Lezama's work and the historical figure of Guevara. As such, the clearest point of departure would be to look at Lezama's own brief writings on Guevara. In the eclectic musings of Lezama edited by Ciro Bianchi Ross, *Imagen y posibilidad*,⁸ Lezama focused on the figure of Guevara with customary poetic flair, transforming the historical figure through his own artistic process into a mythic, heroic figure:

Ernesto Guevara, comandante nuestro

Ceñido por la última prueba, piedra pelada de los comienzos para oír las inauguraciones del verbo, la muerte lo fue a buscar. Saltaba de chamusquina para árbol, de alquileida caballo hablador para hamaca donde la india, con su cántaro que coagula los sueños, lo trae y lo lleva. Hombre de todos los comienzos, de la última, del quedarse con una sola muerte, de particularizarse con la muerte, piedra sobre piedra, piedra creciendo el fuego. Las citas con Tupac Amaru, las charreteras bolivarianas sobre la plata del Potosí, le despertaron los comienzos, la fiebre, los secretos de ir quedándose para siempre. Quiso hacer de los Andes deshabitados, la casa de los secretos. El huso del transcurso, el aceite amaneciendo, el carbunco trocándose en la sopa mágica. Lo que se ocultaba y se dejaba ver era nada menos que el sol, rodeado de medialunas incaicas, de sirenas del séquito de Viracocha, sirenas con sus grandes guitarras. El medialunero Viracocha transformando las piedras en guerreros y los guerreros en piedras. Levantando por el sueño y las invocaciones la ciudad de las murallas y las armaduras. Nuevo Viracocha, de él se esperaban todas las saetas de la posibilidad y ahora se esperaban todos los prodigios en la ensoñación.

Como Anfiareo, la muerte no interrumpe sus recuerdos. La aristía, la protección en el combate, la tuvo siempre a la hora de los gritos y la arcejada del cuello, pero también la areteia, el sacrificio, el afán de

⁷ *Gaceta de Cuba* (76), September 1969, pp.14-15. Reproduced in Lezama 2000: 309.

⁸ A new edition of this work (with a larger run of prints than the Letras Cubanas 1981 edition) would greatly facilitate access to Lezama's more socially focused writings.

holocausto. El sacrificarse en la pirámide funeral, pero antes dio las pruebas terribles de su tamaño para la transfiguración. Donde quiera que hay una piedra, decía Nietzsche, hay una imagen. Y su imagen es uno de los comienzos de los prodigios, del sembradío en la piedra, es decir, el crecimiento tal como aparece en las primeras teogonías, depositando la región de la fuerza en el espacio vacío. (1981: 22-23)

This stirring text is highly revealing of the mythical process expressed by Lezama, and brings into the field of investigation wider approaches to theories of myth. Guevara the hero, his final ordeal, the last step of the quest whereat he will find death, assisted by the dead rebel warrior Tupac Amaru, transformed into a new Viracocha, seeking the liberation of his people, protected by a god-given spell in battle, a fierce warrior, leading to his ultimate sacrifice on the funeral pyramid – these features remove Guevara from historicity and place him within a mythic non-time akin to those narratives explored by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Lezama even crowns the text with the declaration that Guevara is now himself a poetic image, thus incorporating him within the pantheon of figures explored in *La expresión americana*.

Importantly, though, Lezama is not alone in pursuing this transformative assessment of Guevara. It is important to note that where Lezama describes the transformation of historical images into the poetic in an overtly *artistic* fashion, the same process is employed strategically in a political, cultural fashion. Antoni Kapcia describes this process taking place in Havana immediately following the death of Guevara:

In terms of myth, the result was immediate, both spontaneously and deliberately – a public and popular mythification of *Che*, the fallen hero – with the following year being re-named the ‘Year of the Heroic Guerrilla’ and with the famous Korda portrait (with its appropriately visionary gaze) reproduced throughout Cuba, on posters, in newspapers and, most impressively, hung on the walls of many Cubans’ homes. The new myth was immediate and organic, since it referred most directly to the Cubans’ lived and shared experience – *Che* had been Cuba, fighting alone in a hostile world, and his sacrifice had been theirs, and would, presumably, be the ashes from which the new struggle would be born. As one writer expressed it, he became ‘an adopted patron saint of the Cuban government after his death’. As yet, however, there was little positive about the myth, with a sombre and somewhat pessimistic mood. Within a year, however, *Che* was

being enlisted effectively as a symbol to drive forward the faltering campaign for the 1970 harvest and to revolutionise the economy in the appropriately named 'Revolutionary Offensive'. (2000: 189)

Within this brief description it is again clear how the figure of Guevara is removed from a possible objective historicity and thrust into a narrative of the mythic image. Kapcia argues that there is an organic (by which we can understand 'authentic') quality to this mythic narrative, owing to the fact that it originated in Cuba and related directly to the lives of the Cuban people. This being the case, it is also true from the description that there is a certain inorganic quality insofar as this narrative is malleable, versatile, and adaptable to changing social and political circumstances and differing users of the narrative. It thus appears that a certain *rupture* has been described between the historical figure pertaining to a historical reality, and a mythical figure pertaining to the user. Of course, this is precisely the process that Lezama was describing in essentially poetic, aesthetic terms, but this focus on the social and political bears a closer relation to the theories of Roland Barthes concerning the mythologising process as a semiological social process. Barthes describes this process:

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern: [...] the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: *it is a second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. (1993: 114)

The importance of considering Barthes in this argument is due to the emphasis that he places upon the 'natural relationship' (131) between signified and the signified – one that occurs not through the obvious semiological process of equivalence that one would expect of a symbol. In this respect the figure of Guevara, although symbolic in certain dimensions, becomes mythic in the Barthesian sense through the 'natural' signifying value that he, as a historical figure and as a visual image, conveys to the public. This becomes starkly apparent when considering again the historical process outlined above by Kapcia. The image of Guevara – we obviously refer to the

famed Korda portrait – in addition to its symbolic value, has the mythic value of the second-order semiological system. That's to say the photo *signifies* at the iconic level the historical personage of Ernesto Guevara, but that this first-order signification is wrapped into the second-order level of, in the first instance, the struggle 'alone in a hostile world [...] sacrifice [...] the ashes from which the new struggle would be born' (Kapcia 2000: 189); and in the second instance, a mobilising force of energy and sacrifice identifiable with the Revolutionary Offensive. Kapcia further pursues the variance of 'story-line' beneath the Guevara legend into the 1970s, where the '*goes without saying*' (Barthes 143) signifying value of the Guevara history and image served in contrast to its earlier value, to become that of a 'a more static "model for being" rather than the more challenging "model for action" [...] as a hero of the past – of the present order's "pre-history", alongside Martí and other historical figures' (Kapcia 2000: 197). Thus the mythic level of signification was clearly manipulated from the 'organic' value of the present to that of the past – from a narrative initially related to revolutionary fervour to that of uncomplaining and submissive self-sacrifice wholly commensurate with the austerities of the 'Quinquenio Gris'.⁹ And yet, as Kapcia indicates, the contiguity between the image and the 'story-line' is by no means overt and obvious, and in this the process explored by Barthes is brought into sharp relief:

[W]hat allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system. (Barthes 1993: 131)

This 'natural relationship' is precisely the motive for the criticism that Barthes levels against the bourgeois society that he sees as responsible for the generation and consumption of such mythic narratives. In this sense the mythic value embodied within the semiological system

⁹Referring to Cuba's cultural and intellectual life during those years, my friend Ambrosio Fornet coined the phrase "the Gray Quinquennium" (*quinqueneo* [sic] *gris*)' (Retamar 1996: 181). For a historical re-evaluation of this term, see Fornet 2007.

becomes more important than the original denotative meaning of the sign – and Barthes’ two best-known examples are the African boy saluting, *denoting* nothing more than an African boy saluting but signifying at a mythic level ‘that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors’, and the Latin phrase whose first-level signification ‘my name is lion’ is subordinate to the mythic meaning of ‘I am a grammatical example meant to illustrate the rule about the agreement of the predicate’ (1993: 116). In the case of Guevara’s image within 1970s Cuba, a similar process subordinates the denotative value – Ernesto Guevara de la Serna – to the mythic value – moral not material rewards, hard work, discipline, etc. And similar to Barthes’ criticism, we can see this process being the result of a conscious, manipulative design. Here the links with the semiological process of Lezama are also apparent, as the characters of *La expresión americana* are removed from specific historicity and are endowed with mythic value akin to the process outlined by Barthes. Aleijadinho and Kondori are now no mere sculptors from a particular time and place, but are mythic figures of the American baroque ‘contra-conquista’ – they bear the weight of their African (Aleijadinho) and Inca (Kondori) heritage to the extent that they *become* those cultural forces, fusing with the Hispanic in the forceful assertion of an American expression. In this respect we can clearly see that the process outlined by Barthes has different objectives in the context of Lezama’s essays to those of the Cuban political administration – but the semiological process is the same.

Similarly, one can establish the theoretical links between the Lezamian view of myth and the Barthean according to this process. Returning to the earlier analysis, we recall that the essence of ‘el mito’ for Lezama was the elevation to the collective level of the perception of ‘la imagen’ in history. That’s to say, when a character, event or period of history is interpreted collectively (socially/culturally) as mythical, it is due to the process of interpretation that endows upon it such a mythical image. As a result, the historicity of the character or event becomes

subordinate to its newly endowed mythic meaning – and as such the narrative is reduced to a simple series of cultural markers. Mythic figures can accordingly become undisputed (‘goes without saying’) paragons of virtue, strength, chastity, heroism, wickedness, etc. As we have seen within Kapcia’s historical analysis, the figure of Guevara in 1960s and 70s Cuba underwent such a mythic process that created ‘a causal process [...] a natural relationship’ (Barthes 1993: 129) between the historical figure and the various social messages. In a fashion similar yet less politically motivated, Lezama interprets the historical figure of Guevara with natural relationship to established mythical figures, creating a causal process that binds to Guevara virtues of courage, self-sacrifice, support of the gods, etc., positioning Guevara alongside other ‘actores’ (Ulloa & Ulloa 1998: 368) of *La expresión americana*.

Clearly, however, the focus cannot remain exclusively on the political arena of Cuba. The figure of Guevara has undergone similar mythic transformations in a great diversity of cultural environments and for a wide variety of social, political, even artistic objectives. A detailed history of the impact of Guevara upon differing global communities is evidently not to be the purpose of this study, but it is pertinent to the arguments in question to perceive the theoretical design both of Lezama and of Barthes in application when concerning the figure of Guevara.

Martin Ebon’s 1969 study *Che, the making of a legend*, provides an interesting perspective on the crossover between the particularly Cuban and Latin American context of the Guevara narrative into the global context. ‘The myth of Che Guevara has set off a responsive vibration among thousands who see him as the gallant revolutionary – a symbol of rebellion against hypocrisy, injustice, human suffering, and a society without soul’ (1969: 8). Importantly, Ebon identifies a further semiotic value of the Guevara myth – the symbol. Barthes is very clear in maintaining the distinction between the mythic form and the symbol, arguing that:

The form of myth is not a symbol: the Negro who salutes is not the symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable* image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it

becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperialism: once made use of, it becomes artificial. (1993: 118)

The symbol, similar to the metaphor, simply replaces denoted meaning with a new meaning in a process whose success depends upon its evidence. The African boy saluting could be easily contested or rebuked were he to be a symbol, as the implementation of the new signification is deliberate and evident, and therefore open to dispute. Within the myth, the second-order signification emerges not only disguised and covert, but indeed takes subtle precedence over the denoted value. And herein perhaps lies the power of the Guevara image: it operates both as mythic form *and* as symbol. As analysed earlier, the image of Guevara operated according to the mythic process in Cuba insofar as the variable and persuasive narratives apportioned by the image were present and yet not wholly visible, insofar as ‘the picture *naturally* conjured up the concept, as if the signifier *gave a foundation to the signified*’ (Barthes 1993: 129). And yet the image is also symbolic, which in this case does not discredit the mythic value. The vast two-tone representation of Guevara at the Plaza de la Revolución, in its rigid fixity, departs from the mutable ‘story-line’ (Kapcia) or mythic narrative (Barthes), to become a pure, overt symbol of the Revolution. In examining the development of a number of mythic narratives within the context of revolutionary Cuba, Kapcia examines the changing usage and attributed meaning of the Guevara image as both myth and symbol, outlining a distinction that matches closely the perspective of Lezama: ‘Myth can thus be seen as the elevation of a symbol into a narrative, and a symbol therefore as the germ of a myth at a stage before organic mythification has set in’ (2000: 25). Both within and outside of Cuba, therefore, the image can be analysed as similarly both myth and symbol. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, in the 1970 interview with Rita Guibert, explores one possible mythic narrative associated with the figure of Guevara:

El mito Guevara es un mito adoptado por los jóvenes burgueses de los países occidentales y americanos, en especial de estudiantes hijos de padres más o menos acomodados, que expresan así la necesidad de oponerse a sus padres y de paso quitarse su carga de culpas adolescentes. (371-375)

In this respect, Cabrera Infante identifies that the history of Guevara is ruptured from the image, and a new mythic narrative is evoked to supplant the historical narrative. As he describes the process, wealthy Western youth apply to the image of Guevara a mythic narrative to substantiate their own particular sense of rebellion; and with customary cynicism he deplores the manifest irony of such an attribution of meaning. In a similar process yet with a contrasting attitude, John Lee Anderson, biographer of Guevara, expresses to Abel Posse that Guevara is a globally recognised and valuable symbol:

[Anderson] Es increíble el poder de Guevara como símbolo mundial.

[Posse] ¿Símbolo de qué? ¿Qué es lo que representa el logo Guevara, con su boina y esa extraña mirada capturada por Korda, en un lejano mitin en La Habana?

[A] Es el espíritu de rebeldía. Puede que se trate de algo inmanente a la condición social.

[P] Alguien reclama el símbolo, alguien necesita esa boina con esa estrella [...]. (Posse 2004: 159)

With these two citations we can clearly see that one essential difference between the usage of myth and symbol is the extent of the narrative; where Cabrera Infante recognises an extensive ‘story-line’ assigned to the image of Guevara, Anderson identifies a simple, single, conceptual meaning: ‘rebeldía’. The binding factor between these two processes is still integrally linked to the semiological system outlined by Barthes: ‘we can say that the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be *appropriated*’ (1993: 119). With the appropriation of the image, the assignation of meaning becomes dependent not on the signifier itself, but on the user. Clearly, then, the assigned meaning can be extensive and subtle, as identified by Cabrera Infante, or overt and resolute, as identified by Ebon and Anderson; and in being appropriated, the possibilities of meaning are endless. Again we can see that what is described as nefarious by Barthes, and as poetic and positive by Lezama, is very much the same semiological process, as in both cases a rupture occurs between the historical ‘truth’ of, in this case, the person, and its newly assigned meaning. John Lee Anderson charts this very process yet identifies yet a third signifying feature of the Guevara image, the icon. Anderson describes the famous Korda photograph: ‘Che appears as the ultimate revolutionary icon, his eyes

seeming to stare boldly into the future, his very face symbolizing a virile embodiment of outrage at social injustice' (1997a: 465). Again, the process of interpretation privileges the interpretative will over concrete historiography. Indeed we can see how similar a process this is to that described by Lezama, in that Anderson describes a consensus of interpretation that raises the image of Guevara into that of an icon. The icon itself must be understood not according exclusively to a semiotic perspective – a signifier that resembles its signified – but also from a religious and sociological perspective. Kapcia examines the ambiguity of the term within these contexts, identifying the level of veneration that an icon commands from its perceivers.

The difference between myth and either symbol or icon here lies in the 'story-line'; a myth needs one, to remain as a living, adaptable and meaningful guide to real collective action, parallel to the society's self-image, while both a symbol and an icon lack a 'story-line' and thus remain more static, the latter more as a model for perfect being, almost certainly on an individual rather than a collective level. [...] It should, however, be said that the use of the term 'icon' can be misleading, and even loaded and ambiguous. In Protestant societies, icons are usually seen essentially negatively and as equivalent to idolatry, while Eastern Orthodoxy, for example, sees icons not as objects for an alienated veneration but, rather, as accessible representations of an unfathomable abstract deity. (2000: 28/9)

Where Anderson notes the 'iconic image' he evokes this degree of veneration that is addressed towards the image of Guevara, in addition to recognising both the symbolic value: 'youthful defiance', and the mythic: the 'more to learn behind that image'. It is precisely this versatility of sign functions of myth, symbol and icon that apportions such weight and power to the Guevara image: to some he represents a mythic narrative, to others, a symbol and yet to others an icon – indeed the image may flow freely from one to the next within the same usage. This is of immense importance when addressing the employment of the Guevara image in a staggeringly wide range of cultural contexts. For example, both Cabrera Infante and Anderson recognise the importance of Guevara in youth culture – Cabrera Infante referring to the Western 1960s, Anderson to the 1990s. Álvaro Vargas Llosa (2005), meanwhile, creates a

detailed and lengthy list of Western celebrities, Latin American politicians, actors, singers and footballers who ‘have all recently brandished or invoked Guevara’s likeness as a beacon of justice and rebellion against the abuse of power [...] Once again the myth is firing up people whose causes for the most part represent the exact opposite of what Guevara was’. Without entering the dense and heated debate concerning the merits or evils of such manifestations of the Guevara image, it is important to question whether there emerges ‘the impoverishment of meaning’ that Barthes identifies within the mythic process, or whether the process of rupture and appropriation detailed both by Barthes and Lezama in actuality rescues such use and possible abuse from irony. To address this question, once again the considerations of John Lee Anderson can be examined:

If anything, I see Che’s appeal to Gen-X’ers as a form of symbolic identification with a rebel figure, someone critical of the status quo. Wearing Che’s face on your T-shirt is a way of saying: “I am a rebel in spirit; I don’t accept what the Establishment stands for.” For most, this essentially aesthetic, non-threatening form of revolt will fade as they graduate from college, get their first jobs, and begin families – along with their nose rings and bleached hair. But for the meantime, it is imperative that society allows them the room to broadcast their inconformity with the way things are, just as it is necessary that society tolerates their hopes of making a future difference. (1997b)

With no critique of the rupture between Guevara as a historical figure and Guevara as a symbol, Anderson identifies the crucial issue that Guevara, in so many social contexts, no longer pertains to any historical reality, but to the users of the image. Anderson sees no irony here, as he equates the image of Guevara with other social signs like nose rings and bleached hair. Where both Cabrera Infante and Álvaro Vargas Llosa highlight this rupture and appropriation as an insidious or merely distasteful act, Anderson perceives it as a natural and healthy ‘non-threatening form of revolt’. It appears that the issue upon which this divergence of opinion rests is the ‘organic’ quality expressed by Kapcia. If the evocation of Guevara is at once contiguous with the ‘empirical’ historical figure, is it more valuable than when it is used symbolically for newer and contextually divergent purposes?

It precisely upon this very dichotomy that we can approach the image of Guevara globally, insofar as the image is appropriated by such a wide assortment of social groupings that the meaning can at times be starkly contrasting. When the banner with Guevara's image flies above an anti-globalisation demonstration, do we need to search for the historical links between Guevara's anti-imperialist writings and actions in order to justify the use of the image?¹⁰ When flown at the immigrant workers demonstrations in March 2006 across the US, does Guevara here stand less for anti-imperialism and more for his Latino identity, converting his image into a totemic rallying point of cultural identification against the essentially non-Hispanic enemy? Does Guevara's bellicose biography position him uneasily alongside Ghandi, Lennon, Marley, Martin Luther King, Ginsberg, as iconic champions of peace or social justice of the Twentieth Century? When badges, T-shirts, berets, pencils and pencil sharpeners are sold in a stationary shop in a regional town in the UK, do such items bear a different message to when they are sold in a market of Old Havana? And does such merchandise represent a valid form of rebelliousness as identified by Anderson, or is it merely a fashion accessory? When, for example, Aleida Guevara explains to a Spanish readership of *El País*: 'No es una imagen vacía, un icono pegado a la pared. Es un ser humano muy completo que ojalá pueda ser imitado por muchos otros seres humanos en el planeta' (in Bauzà 2007), or when Cuban school children declare 'seremos como el Che', what element of the historiography of Guevara is to be appropriated and imitated? Clearly in 1970s Cuba it wasn't the long hair or criticism of the Soviet Union – therefore again we can perceive the Barthean process of rupture and appropriation that determine the mythic narrative as operating upon the *meaning* of Guevara in varying social contexts.

Again, we can return to Lezama. Brett Levinson pertinently suggests that 'history, according to Lezama, begins by decomposing and recomposing itself ("el hecho de descomponer en

¹⁰ 'Che is watching over us. He is our secular saint. Despite all the paraphernalia, he comes back. Thirty years after his death, his image cuts across generations, his myth hovers over neoliberalism's delusions of grandeur. Irreverent, a joker, stubborn, morally stubborn, unforgettable' (Taibo II 1997: 586-7).

imágenes”). That is, the act of construction via the image is always a reconstruction that “wipes out” (substitutes for) what it reconstructs [...] then filling in the empty space’ (1993: 61). This is the very process of rupture and appropriation that we witness operating upon the Guevara history. The Korda image of Guevara as a non-aggressive symbol of teenage rebellion alongside ‘nose rings and bleached hair’ (Anderson 1997b) has been removed from its historical source and thrust into a new discourse that may have little or nothing in relation to the historical Ernesto Guevara. Therefore the question remains as to whether the rupture has been so complete that all traces of contiguity between the image and its historical denotation have been removed, so that the image is no longer the historical Guevara, but is now a nameless, history-less symbol of rebelliousness. Yet this particular meaning is merely one of many – the sheer versatility of meaning attributed to Guevara is staggering – and, without the space here for further analysis, it is worth mentioning a few of these narratives in which meaning is ascribed to Guevara at both the symbolic and the Barthean mythic.

Guevara as the Hero has in many discourses been moulded into the *monomyth* steps of heroism as examined by Joseph Campbell, a mythic narrative reinforced by his official Cuban title of ‘Guerrillero Heroico’.¹¹ Guevara has been thrust into narratives that make him appear almost archetypal: as martyr; as secular saint (Taibo); as a modern Quixote (Posse 2004); as Christ (numerous sources testify to the ‘passion’ of Guevara in Bolivia, and the Christ-like *pieta* of his corpse); as a modern Trotsky to Castro’s Stalin; as a modern Martí; as an American Beat alongside Kerouac and Cassady (a narrative borne out by Salles’ film *The Motorcycle Diaries*); as a Romantic (Cabrera Infante [1972] equates his life and death to a romantic model established by Byron); as a Renaissance Man; as the swarthy Latin; and as the Villain (Fontova 2005). What is important about these different narratives is firstly their degree of connection to

¹¹ The journey of the Hero can be briefly summarised as the following: ‘The Call to Adventure – The unexpected call to action. Supernatural Aid – The helper figure that prepares the hero in some way for the trials to come. The Threshold – The point in the story where the hero stands poised to enter a mysterious new world. The Trials – The trials and ordeals the hero must endure. The Return – Having completed the trials the hero brings back a boon to his society’ (Joseph Campbell Foundation <http://www.jcf.org/>).

or separation from the historically-defined Ernesto Guevara, and secondly, their sheer diversity. This powerful versatility of both image and narrative must in many respects account for the ubiquity of Guevara in contemporary culture, a feature reinforced by Mike González in his recent study: ‘The image of Che does not belong to a state, any state, but to the movement that has discovered him’ (173). Here Lezama’s vision of history is defiantly activated.

Returning, therefore, to the initial analysis of this study, we have identified that Lezama suggested in *La expresión americana* that an event, person or period of history can be perceived as embodying a spirit of poetic image that can raise it to the level of ‘mito’, eventually forging ‘una era imaginaria’. Importantly, this power of ‘imagen’ and ‘mito’ is a quality that is conferred upon the historical moment by the poetic will. In this, as discussed, the interpretation of history becomes an act at once comparable to the interpretation of a poetic text. History is thus appropriated by the interpreter. Here the crossover to the perspective of Barthes is striking, who argued that this very appropriation of historical (or contemporary) narrative becomes the essential feature of the myth process.¹² As briefly outlined, the historical figure of Ernesto Guevara has undergone a great variety of adaptations and appropriations in a great variety of social and cultural contexts over the last forty years, in a process that is at once akin both to Lezama’s vision of history and that of Roland Barthes. And yet the questions remain as to whether this rupture and appropriation ‘suppresses and impoverishes the meaning’ (Barthes 118) – a feature identified by many; or whether this process enriches and awakens new and fertile meaning – a feature identified by Anderson, Taibo III and others. ‘El horror vacui’, Lezama declared on many occasions, ‘es dejarse sin imágenes’ (1970: 444). Lezama further declared that Guevara filled the void with *la imagen*, ‘depositando la región de la fuerza en el espacio vacío’. Has Lezama’s declaration become prophetic?

¹² ‘In this sense, we can say that the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be *appropriated*’ (Barthes 1993: 119).

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