

1970

POSTERS: ADVERTISEMENT, ART,  
POLITICAL ARTIFACT, COMMODITY

Susan Sontag

IT HAS BECOME ROUTINE for observers of graphic design to call for criticism able to situate graphic production in the wider matrix of culture, but this has rarely been achieved as convincingly as in Susan Sontag's essay on Cuban revolutionary posters. Sontag (b. 1933), one of the United States' best-known cultural critics, visited Cuba and, in 1969, wrote about the country—controversially—in the left journal *Ramparts*. Asked by *Ramparts*' art director Dugald Stermer to contribute an introduction to his large-format collection of Cuban posters, Sontag delivered a forensic, partly historical analysis of the medium, showing how a capitalist invention, which began as means of encouraging "a social climate in which it is normative to buy," ended up becoming a commodity itself. She relates this popular new Cuban art form designed to raise and complicate consciousness to developments in film, literature, and fine art, before turning to the problematic position of the non-Cuban viewer. Posters, Sontag concludes, are substitutes for experience; collecting them is a form of emotional and moral tourism, and Stermer's book is implicated in a tacit betrayal of the revolutionary use and meaning of images now consumed as just another dish on the left-liberal bourgeois menu.—RP

Posters are not simply public notices. A public notice, however widely circulated, may be a means of signaling only one person, someone whose identity is unknown to the author of the notice. (One of the earliest known public notices, found in the ruins of ancient Thebes, is a papyrus advertising a reward for the return of an escaped slave.) More typically, most pre-modern societies mounted public notices to circulate news about topics of general interest, such as spectacles, taxation, and the death and accession of rulers. Still, even when the information it carries concerns many people, rather than a few or just one, a public notice is not the same as a poster. Both posters and public notices address the person not as an individual, but as an unidentified member of the body politic. But the poster, as distinct from the public notice, presupposes the modern concept of the public—in which the members of a society are defined primarily as spectators and consumers. A public notice aims to inform or command. A poster aims to seduce, to exhort, to sell, to educate, to convince, to appeal. Whereas a public notice distributes information to interested or alert citizens, a poster reaches out to grab those who might otherwise pass it by. A public notice posted on a wall is passive, requiring that the spectator present himself before it to read what is written. A poster claims attention—at a distance. It is visually aggressive.

Posters are aggressive because they appear in the context of other posters. The public notice is a freestanding statement, but the form of the poster depends on the fact that many posters exist—competing with (and sometimes reinforcing) each other. Thus posters also presuppose the modern concept of public space—as a theater of

persuasion. Throughout the Rome of Julius Caesar, there were signboards reserved for posting announcements of general importance; but these were inserted into a space that was otherwise relatively clean verbally. The poster, however, is an integral element of modern public space. The poster, as distinct from the public notice, implies the creation of urban, public space as an arena of signs: the image- and word-choked façades and surfaces of the great modern cities.

The main technical and aesthetic qualities of the poster all follow from these modern redefinitions of the citizen and of public space. Thus posters, unlike public notices, are inconceivable before the invention of the printing press. The advent of printing quickly brought about the duplication of public notices as well as books; William Caxton made the earliest known *printed* public notice in 1480. But printing alone did not give rise to posters, which had to await the invention of a far cheaper and more sophisticated color printing process—lithography—by Senefelder in the early nineteenth century; and the development of the high-speed presses which, by 1848, could print ten thousand sheets an hour. Unlike the public notice, the poster depends essentially on efficient, inexpensive reproducibility for the purpose of mass distribution. The other obvious traits of a poster, apart from its being intended for reproduction in large quantities—its scale, its decorativeness, and its mixture of linguistic and pictorial means—also follow from the role posters play in modern public space. Here is Harold F. Hutchinson's definition, at the beginning of his book *The Poster, An Illustrated History from 1860* (London, 1968):

A poster is essentially a large announcement, usually with a pictorial element, usually printed on paper and usually displayed on a wall or billboard to the general public. Its purpose is to draw attention to whatever an advertiser is trying to promote and to impress some message on the passer-by. The visual or pictorial element provides the initial attraction—and it must be striking enough to catch the eye of the passer-by and to overcome the counter-attractions of the other posters, and it usually needs a supplementary verbal message which follows up and amplifies the pictorial theme. The large size of most posters enables this verbal message to be read clearly at a distance.

A public notice usually consists entirely of words. Its values are those of "information:" intelligibility, explicitness, completeness. In a poster the visual or plastic elements dominate, not the text. The words (whether few or many) form part of the overall visual composition. The values of a poster are first those of "appeal," and only second of information. The rules for giving information are subordinated to the rules which endow a message, any message, with impact: brevity, asymmetrical emphasis, condensation.

Unlike the public notice, which can exist in any society possessing a written language, the poster could not exist before the specific historic conditions of modern capitalism. Sociologically, the advent of the poster reflects the development of an industrialized economy whose goal is ever-increasing mass consumption, and (some-what later, when posters turned political) of the modern secular centralized nation-state, with its peculiarly diffuse conception of ideological consensus and its rhetoric of mass political participation. It is capitalism that has brought about that peculiarly modern redefinition of the public in terms of the activities of consumption and spectatorship. The earliest famous posters all had a specific function: to encourage a

Chéret, the first of the great poster makers, which range from cabarets, music halls, dance halls, and operas to oil lamps, apéritifs, and cigarette papers. Chéret, who was born in 1836, designed more than a thousand posters. The first important English poster makers, the Beggarstaffs—who began in the early 1890s, and were boldly derivative of the French poster makers—also mostly advertised soft goods and the theater. In America, the first distinguished poster work was done for magazines. Will Bradley, Louis Rhead, Edward Penfield, and Maxfield Parrish were employed by such magazines as *Harper's*, *Century*, *Lippincott's*, and *Scribner's* to design a different cover for each issue; these cover designs were then reproduced as posters to sell the magazines to the expanding middle-class reading public.

Most books on the subject flatly assume the mercantile context as essential to the poster. (Hutchinson, for instance, is typical in the way he defines the poster by its selling function.) But even though commercial advertising provided the ostensible content of all the early posters, Chéret, followed by Eugene Grasset, were quickly recognized as "artists." Already in 1880, an influential French art critic declared that he found a thousand times more talent in a poster by Chéret than in most paintings on the walls of the Paris Salon. Still, it took a second generation of poster makers—some of whom had already established reputations in the serious, "free" art of painting—to establish for a wide public that the poster was an art form, not simply an offshoot of commerce. This happened between 1890, when Toulouse-Lautrec was commissioned to produce a series of posters advertising the Moulin Rouge, and 1894, when Alphonse Mucha designed the poster for *Gismonda*, the first of his dazzling series of posters of Sarah Bernhardt in her productions at the Théâtre de la Renaissance. During this period the streets of Paris and London became an outdoor gallery, with new posters appearing almost every day. But posters did not have to advertise culture, or present glamorous or exotic imagery, to be recognized as works of art themselves. Their subjects could be quite "common." In 1894, work with such lowly commercial subjects as Steinlen's poster advertising sterilized milk and the Beggarstaffs' poster for Rowntree's Cocoa were being hailed for their qualities as graphic art. Thus, only two decades after they began appearing, posters were widely acknowledged as an art form. During the mid-1890s there were two public art exhibits in London entirely devoted to posters. In 1895 an *Illustrated History of the Placard* came out in London; between 1896 and 1900 a publisher in Paris issued a five-volume *Les Maîtres de l'Affiche*. An English journal called the *Poster* appeared between 1898 and 1900. Amassing private collections of posters became fashionable in the early 1890s, and W. S. Roger's *A Book of the Poster* (1901) was specifically addressed to this already sizeable audience of enthusiastic poster collectors.

Compared with the other new art forms that arose toward the end of the last century, posters achieved the status of "art" rather more rapidly than most. The reason, perhaps, is the number of distinguished artists—such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Mucha, and Beardsley—who quickly turned to the poster form. Without the infusion of their talents and prestige, posters might have had to wait as long as movies did to be recognized as works of art in their own right. A longer resistance to the poster as art would probably have been inspired less by its "impure" origin in commerce than by its essential dependence on the process of technological duplication. Yet it is precisely this dependence which makes the poster a distinctively modern art form. Painting and

growing proportion of the population to spend money on soft consumer goods, entertainments, and the arts. Posters advertising the great industrial firms, banks, and hard commodities came later. Typical of the original function are the subjects of Jules Chéret, the first of the great poster makers, which range from cabarets, music halls, dance halls, and operas to oil lamps, apéritifs, and cigarette papers. Chéret, who was born in 1836, designed more than a thousand posters. The first important English poster makers, the Beggarstaffs—who began in the early 1890s, and were boldly derivative of the French poster makers—also mostly advertised soft goods and the theater. In America, the first distinguished poster work was done for magazines. Will Bradley, Louis Rhead, Edward Penfield, and Maxfield Parrish were employed by such magazines as *Harper's*, *Century*, *Lippincott's*, and *Scribner's* to design a different cover for each issue; these cover designs were then reproduced as posters to sell the magazine to the expanding middle-class reading public.

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sculpture, the traditional shapes of visual art, inevitably had their meaning and aura profoundly altered when they entered, in Walter Benjamin's classic phrase, "the age of mechanical reproduction." But the poster (like still photography and the cinema) carries no history from the pre-modern world; it could exist only in the era of mechanical duplication. Unlike a painting, a poster was never meant to exist as a unique object. Therefore, reproducing a poster does not make a second-generation object, one aesthetically inferior to the original or diminished in its social, monetary, or symbolic value. From its conception, the poster is destined to be reproduced, to exist in multiples.

Of course, posters have never won the status of a major art form. Poster-making is usually labeled an "applied" art, because, it is assumed, the poster aims to put across the value of a product or an idea—in contrast to, say, a painting or sculpture, whose aim is the free expression of the artist's individuality. In this view, the poster maker, someone with artistic skills which he lends, for a fee, to a seller, belongs to a different breed from the real artist, who makes things which are intrinsically valuable and self-justifying. Thus, Hutchinson writes:

A poster artist (who is not merely an artist whose work happens to be used on a poster) is not drawing and painting solely for self-expression, to release his own emotions, or to salve his own esthetic conscience. His art is an applied art, and it is art applied to the cause of communication, which may be dictated by the demands of a service, message, or product with which he may be out of sympathy but whose advocate he has temporarily consented to be, usually in return for suitable financial remuneration.

But to define the poster as being, unlike "fine" art forms, primarily concerned with advocacy—and the poster artist as someone who, like a whore, works for money and tries to please a client—is dubious, simplistic. (It is also unhistorical. Only since the early nineteenth century has the artist been generally understood as working to express himself, or for the sake of "art.") What makes posters, like book jackets and magazine covers, an applied art is *not* that they are single-mindedly devoted to "communication," or that the people who do them are more regularly or better paid than most painters and sculptors. Posters are an applied art because, typically, they apply what has already been done in the other arts. Aesthetically, the poster has always been parasitic on the respectable arts of painting, sculpture, even architecture. In the numerous posters they did, Toulouse-Lautrec, Mucha, and Beardsley only transposed a style already articulated in their paintings and drawings. The work of those painters—from Puvis de Chavannes to Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner to Picasso to Larry Rivers, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Roy Lichtenstein—who have occasionally tried their hand at posters is not only not innovative but mainly casts into a more accessible form their most distinctive and familiar stylistic mannerisms. As an art form, posters are rarely in the lead. Rather, they serve to disseminate already mature elitist art conventions. Indeed, posters have been one of the main instruments during the last century for popularizing what is agreed on, by the arbiters of the worlds of painting and sculpture, as visual good taste. A representative sample of posters done in any given period would consist mostly of work that is banal and visually reactionary. But most of what are considered *good* posters bear some clear relation to what is fashionable visually, not merely popular—fashionable, though, only up to a point. The poster never embodies a really new style—high fashion is, by definition, "ugly" and off-putting



at first view—but fashion at a slightly later stage of assimilation or acceptability. For example, Cassandre's famous posters for Dubonnet (1924) and the transatlantic liner *Normandie* (1932), clearly influenced by Cubism and the Bauhaus movement, employed these styles after they were commonplaces in the fine art scene, already digested.

The relation posters have to visual fashion is that of "quotation." Thus, the poster artist is usually a plagiarist (whether of himself or others), and plagiarism is one main feature of the history of poster aesthetics. The earliest good poster makers outside Paris, who were English, freely adapted the look of the first wave of French posters. The Beggarstaffs (a pseudonym for two Englishmen who had studied art in Paris) were heavily influenced by Toulouse-Lautrec; Dudley Hardy, best remembered for his posters for the Gilbert and Sullivan productions at the Savoy Theater, owed to both Chéret and Lautrec. This built-in "decadence" continues unabated to the present, as each important poster artist partly feeds on earlier schools of poster art. One of the most remarkable recent examples of this functional parasitism on earlier poster work is the brilliant series of posters done in San Francisco in the mid-1960s for the great rock ballrooms, the Fillmore and the Avalon, which freely plagiarized Mucha and the other Art Nouveau masters.

The stylistically parasitic trend in the history of the poster is additional confirmation of the poster as an art form. Posters, good posters at any rate, cannot be considered mainly as instruments for communicating something whose normative form is "information." Indeed, it is precisely on this point that a poster differs generically from a public notice—and enters the territory of art. Unlike the public notice, whose function is unambiguously to say something, the poster is not concerned ultimately with anything so clear or unequivocal. The point of the poster may be its "message:" the advertisement, the announcement, the slogan. But what is recognized as an effective poster is one that transcends its utility in delivering that message. Unlike the public notice, the poster (despite its frankly commercial origins) is not just utilitarian. The effective poster—even one selling the lowliest household product—always exhibits that duality which is the very mark of art: the tension between the wish to say (explicitness, literalness) and the wish to be silent (truncation, economy, condensation, evocativeness, mystery, exaggeration). The very fact that posters were designed to have instant impact, to be "read" in a flash, because they had to compete with other posters, strengthened the aesthetic thrust of the poster form.

It is hardly accidental that the first generation of great posters was made in Paris, the art capital but hardly the economic capital of the nineteenth century. The poster was born out of the aestheticizing impulse. It aimed to make of selling something "beautiful." Beyond that aim lies a tendency which has continued throughout the hundred-year history of poster art. Whatever its origins in selling specific products and performances, the poster has tended to develop an independent existence as a major element in the public decor of modern cities (and of highways, as the nature-effacing links between cities). Even when a product, service, spectacle, or institution is named, the ultimate function of the poster may be purely decorative. Only a short step separates the posters done in the 1950s for London Transport, which were more ornaments than advertisements for their subject, from the Peter Max posters of the late 1960s mounted on the sides of buses in New York City, which advertised nothing at all. The possible subversion of the poster form by its drift toward aesthetic autonomy is confirmed by the fact that people began so early, already in the 1890s, to collect posters; thereby removing this object preeminently designed for public, out-

door space, and ostensibly for the cursory passing glance of crowds, to a private, interior space—the home of the collector—where it could become the subject of close (i.e., aesthetic) scrutiny.

Even the specific commercial function of posters, in their early history, strengthens the aesthetic basis of the poster form. Alongside the fact that posters, at their origin a device of commercial advertising, reflect the intensity of a single-minded didactic aim (to sell something) is the fact that the first task of posters was the promoting of goods and services that were economically *marginal*. The poster originates in the effort of expanding capitalist productivity to sell surplus or luxury goods, household articles, nonstaple foods, liqueurs and soft drinks, public entertainments (cabaret, music hall, bullfights), “culture” (magazines, plays, operas), and traveling for pleasure. Hence, the poster frequently had, from the beginning, a light or witty tone; one main tradition in poster aesthetics favors the cool, the amusing. Evident in many of the early posters is an element of exaggeration, of irony, of doing “too much” for their subject. Specialized as it may seem, the theatrical poster is perhaps the archetypal poster genre of the nineteenth century, beginning with Toulouse-Lautrec’s harsh Jane Avril and Yvette Guilbert, Chéret’s suave Loïe Fuller, and Mucha’s hieratic Sarah Bernhardt. Throughout the history of the poster, theatricality has been one of its recurrent values—as the poster-object itself may be viewed as a kind of instant visual theater in the street.

Exaggeration is one of the charms of poster art, when its tasks are commercial. But the theatricality of poster aesthetics found its heavy as well as playful expression, when posters became political. It seems surprising how late the political role of the poster followed the advertising role it fulfilled from its origins around 1870. Public notices continued to serve political functions, like calls to arms, throughout this period. An even closer precedent for the political poster had been flourishing since the early nineteenth century; the political cartoon, which, in the burgeoning weekly and monthly magazines, had reached a masterly form in the hands of Cruikshank and Gillray, and later Nast. But despite these precedents, the poster remained largely innocent of any political function until 1914. Then, almost overnight, the newly belligerent governments of Europe recognized the efficacy of the medium of commercial advertising for political purposes. The leading theme of the first political posters was patriotism. In France, posters appealed to citizens to subscribe to the various war loans; in England, posters exhorted men to join the army (from 1914 until 1916, when conscription was introduced); in Germany, posters were more broadly ideological, arousing love of country by demonizing the enemy. Most posters done during World War I were crude graphically. Their emotional range moved between the pompous, like Leete’s poster of Lord Kitchener and his accusatory finger with the quotation “Your country needs YOU” (1914), and the hysterical, like Bernhard’s nightmare anti-Bolshevik poster (same year). With rare exceptions, such as the poster by Faivre (1916) urging contributions to the French war loan of that year under the slogan “*On les aura*,” the World War I posters have little interest now other than historical.

The birth of serious political graphics came right after 1918, when the new revolutionary movements convulsing Europe at the close of the war stimulated a vast outpouring of radical poster exhortation, particularly in Germany, Russia, and Hungary. It was in the aftermath of World War I that the political poster began to constitute a valuable branch of poster art. Not surprisingly, much of the best work in the revolutionary poster was done by collectives of poster makers. Two of the earliest were the “November group,” formed in Berlin in 1918, among whose members were Max

Pechstein and Hans Richter, and ROSTA, formed in Moscow in 1919, which included as active artists the poet Mayakovsky, the Constructivist artist El Lissitzky, and Alexander Rodchenko. More recent examples of revolutionary poster work produced by collectives are the Republic and Communist posters made in Madrid and Barcelona in 1936–37 and the posters turned out by revolutionary students at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris during the revolution of May 1968. (Chinese “wall posters” fall into the category of public notices rather than posters, as the terms are used here.) Of course, many individual artists have made radical poster art outside the discipline of a collective. Recently, in 1968, the revolutionary poster was the subject of a large and impressive retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm.

The advent of political posters may seem like a sharp break with the original function of posters (promoting consumerism). But the historical conditions which produced posters first as commercial advertising and later as political propaganda are intertwined. If the commercial poster is an outgrowth of the capitalist economy, with its need to attract people to spend more money on nonessential goods and on spectacles, the political poster reflects another specifically nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon, first articulated in the matrix of capitalism: the modern nation-state whose claim to ideological monopoly has as its *minimal*, unquestioned expression the goal of universal education and the power of mass mobilization for warfare. Despite this historical link, however, there is a major difference of context for commercial and political posters. While the presence of posters used as commercial advertising generally indicates the degree to which a society defines itself as stable, pursuing an economic and political status quo, the presence of political posters generally indicates that the society considers itself in a state of emergency. Posters are now a familiar instrument, during periods of crisis for the nation-state, for promulgating political attitudes in summary form. In the older capitalist countries, with bourgeois-democratic political institutions, their use is mainly confined to wartime. In the newer countries, most of which are experimenting (not too successfully) with a mixture of state capitalism and state socialism and are undergoing chronic economic and political crises, posters are a common tool of nation-building. Particularly striking is the extent to which posters have been used to “ideologize” relatively unideological societies in the Third World. Two examples from this political year are the posters being put up all over Egypt (most of them blown up newspaper cartoons), as air war in the Middle East escalates, identifying America as the enemy who stands behind Israel, and the posters that swiftly appeared throughout relatively poster-free Phnom Penh in April 1970, after the fall of Prince Sihanouk, inculcating hatred of the resident Vietnamese and rousing the Cambodians to war against the “Viet Cong.”

Obviously, posters have a different destiny where they disseminate the official view in a country, as do the British recruiting posters of World War I or the Cuban posters for OSPAAAL and COR in this book, than they have where they speak for an adversary minority within the country. Posters expressing the majority view of a politicized society (or situation) are guaranteed mass distribution. Their presence is typically repetitive. Posters expressing insurgent, rather than establishment, values get less widely distributed. They usually end being defaced by irate members of the silent majority or ripped off by the police. The chances for the insurgent poster’s longevity and its prospects of distribution are, of course, improved when it is sponsored by an organized political party. Renato Guttuso’s anti-Vietnam War poster (1966), done for the Italian Communist Party, is a less fragile political instrument than the anti-Vietnam



posters of freelance dissenters, like Takashi Kono in Japan and Sigvaard Olsson in Sweden. But however dissimilar in context and destiny, all political posters share a common purpose; ideological mobilization. Only the scale of this purpose varies. Maxi-mobilization is a realistically feasible goal when posters are the vehicle of a ruling political doctrine. Insurgent or revolutionary posters aim, more modestly, at a mini-mobilization of opinion against the prevailing official line.

One might suppose that political posters produced by a dissenting minority would need to be, and often are, more appealing visually, less strident or simplistic ideologically, than those produced by governments in power. They have to compete for the attention of a distracted, hostile, or indifferent public. In fact, differences of aesthetic and intellectual quality do not run along these lines. State-sponsored work may be as lively and loose as the Cuban political posters or as banal and conformist as the posters in the Soviet Union and East Germany. A similar range of quality occurs among insurgent political posters. Very distinguished poster work was done for the German Communist Party in the 1920s, by John Heartfield and Georg Grosz among others. During the same period, only naïve agit-prop posters, like William Gropper's poster urging support for the striking textile workers in Passaic or Fred Ellis' poster demanding justice for Sacco and Vanzetti, both from 1927, were being made for the American Communist Party. The art of propaganda is not necessarily ennobled or refined by powerlessness, any more than it is inevitably coarsened when backed by power or when serving official goals. What determines whether good political posters are made in a country, more than the talent of the artists and the health of the other visual arts, is the cultural policy of the government or party or movement—whether it recognizes quality, whether it encourages, even demands it. Contrary to the invidious idea many people have about propaganda as such, there is no inherent limit to the aesthetic quality or moral integrity of political posters—no limit, that is, separate from the conventions that affect (and perhaps limit) all poster-making, that done for commercial advertising purposes as much as that done for the purposes of political indoctrination.

Most political posters, like commercial posters, rely on the image rather than the word. As the aim of an effective advertising poster is the stimulation (and simplification) of tastes and appetites, the aim of an effective political poster is rarely more than the stimulation (and simplification) of moral sentiments. And the classic means of stimulating and simplifying is through a visual metaphor. Most commonly, a thing or an idea is attached to the emblematic image of a person. In commercial advertising, the paradigm occurs as early as Chéret. He designed most of his posters, no matter what they were selling, around the image of a pretty girl—the “mechanical bride,” as Marshall McLuhan named her twenty years ago in his witty book about contemporary versions of that image. The equivalent in political advertising is the heroic figure. Such a figure may be a celebrated leader of the struggle, living or martyred, or an anonymous representative citizen, such as a soldier, a worker, a mother, a war victim. The point of the image in a commercial poster is to be attractive, often sexually attractive, thereby covertly identifying material acquisitiveness with sexual appetite and subliminally reinforcing the first by appealing to the second. A political poster proceeds more directly and appeals to emotions with more ethical prestige. It is not enough for the image to be attractive, even seductive, since what is being urged is always put forth as more than merely “desirable;” it is imperative. Commercial advertising imagery cultivates the capacity to be tempted, the willingness to indulge private desires and liberties. The imagery of political posters cultivates the sense of obligation, the willingness to renounce private desires and liberties.

To create a feeling of psychic or moral obligation, political posters use a variety of emotional appeals. In posters featuring a single model figure, the image can be heart-rending, like the napalmed child in posters protesting the Vietnam War; it can be admonitory, like Lord Kitchener in Leete's poster; it can be inspirational, like the face of Che in many posters made since his death. A variant of the poster focusing on one exemplary persona is the type that depicts the agon or struggle itself, juxtaposing the heroic figure with the figure of a dehumanized or caricatured enemy. The tableau usually shows the enemy—the Hun, the capitalist in frock coat, the Bolshevik, LBJ—either being pinned down or in flight. Compared with posters featuring only exemplary figures, posters with agon imagery usually appeal to cruder feelings, like vindictiveness and resentment and moral complacency. But depending on the actual odds of the struggle and the moral tone of the culture, such imagery can also bypass these emotions and simply make people feel braver.

As in commercial advertising, the image in political posters is usually backed up by some words, the fewer (it's thought) the better. The words second the image. One handsome exception to this rule is Sigvaard Olsson's black-and-white poster of Hugo Blanco (1968), which superimposes a lengthy quotation in heavy type over the face of the jailed Peruvian revolutionary. Another exception, even more striking, is the COR poster reproduced here on p. 18, which dispenses altogether with an image and makes a bluntly colorful, nearly abstract arrangement of the words of a sophisticated ideological slogan in maxim form: "*Comunimo no es crear conciencia con el dinero sino crear riqueza con la conciencia.*"

## II.

In capitalist society, posters are a ubiquitous part of the decor of the urban landscape. Connoisseurs of new forms of beauty may find visual gratification in the unplanned collage of posters (and neon signs) that decorate the cities. It is an additive effect, of course, since few posters to be seen outdoors nowadays, regarded one by one, give any aesthetic pleasure. More specialized connoisseurs—of the aesthetics of infestation, of the libertine aura of litter, and of the libertarian implications of randomness—can find pleasure in this decor. But what keeps posters multiplying in the urban areas of the capitalist world is their commercial utility in selling particular products and, beyond that, in perpetuating a social climate in which it is normative to buy. Since the economy's health depends on steadily encroaching upon whatever limits people's habits of consumption, there can be no limit to the effort to saturate public space with advertising.

A revolutionary communist society, which rejects the consumer society, must inevitably redefine, and thereby limit, poster art. In this context, only a selective and controlled use of posters makes sense. Nowhere is this selective use of posters more authentic than in Cuba, which has, by revolutionary aspiration (abetted by, but not reducible to, the cruel economic scarcities imposed by the American blockade), repudiated mercantile values more radically than any communist country outside of Asia. Cuba obviously has no use for the poster to inspire its citizens to buy consumer goods. That still leaves a large place for the poster, though. Any modern society, communist no less than capitalist, is a network of signs. Under revolutionary communism, the poster remains one principal type of public sign: decorating shared ideas and firing moral sympathies, rather than promoting private appetites.

As one would expect a large proportion of the posters in Cuba have political subjects. But unlike most work in this genre, the purpose of the political poster in Cuba is not simply to build morale. It is to raise and complicate consciousness—the

highest aim of the revolution itself. (Leaving out China, Cuba is perhaps the only current example of a communist revolution pursuing that ethical aim as an explicit political goal.) The Cuban use of political posters recalls Mayakovsky's vision in the early 1920s, before Stalinist oppression crushed the independent revolutionary artists and scrapped the communist-humanist goal of creating better types of human beings. For the Cubans, the success of their revolution is not measured by its ability to preserve itself, withstanding the remorseless hostility of the United States and its Latin American satraps. It is measured by its progress in educating the "new man." To be armed for self-defense, to be on the slow arduous road to some degree of agricultural self-sufficiency, to have virtually abolished illiteracy, to have provided the majority of people with an adequate diet and medical services for the first time in their lives—all these remarkable accomplishments are just preparations for the "avant-garde" revolution Cuba wishes to make. In this revolution, a revolution in consciousness that requires turning the whole country into a school, posters are an important method (among others) of public teaching.

Posters have rarely voiced the avant-garde of political consciousness, any more than they have been genuinely avant-garde aesthetically. Left-revolutionary posters usually occupy the middle and rear portions of political consciousness. Their job is to confirm, reinforce, and further disseminate values held by the ideologically more advanced strata of the population. But Cuban political posters are not typical. In most political posters, the level of exhortation has not greater amplitude than a few simple emotive words—a command, a victory slogan, an invective. The Cubans use posters to convey complex moral ideas (notably some posters made for COR, like "Crear conciencia . . ." and "Espíritu de trabajo . . ."). Unlike most political posters, the Cuban posters sometimes say a great deal. And, sometimes, they say hardly anything at all. Perhaps the most advanced aspect of Cuban political posters is their taste for visual and verbal understatement. There seems no demand on the poster artists to be explicitly and continuously didactic. And when didactic, the posters—in happy contrast to the Cuban press, which seems seriously to underestimate the intelligence of people—are almost never strident or shrill or heavy-handed. (This is hardly to argue that there is no proper place for bluntness in political art, or that stridency always betrays intelligence. One of the most important means of changing consciousness is to give things their proper *names*. And naming may, in certain historical situations, mean name-calling. Broadcasting relevant invective and insult, like the French posters from May 1968 which pointed out "*C'est lui, le chienlit*" and "*CRS=SS*," had a perfectly serious political use in de-mystifying and delegitimizing repressive authority.)

In the Cuban context, however, such stridency or heavy-handedness would be an error, as the poster makers often avow. The posters mostly keep to a tone which is sober and emotionally dignified while never detached, while being put to most of the high-keyed uses political posters conventionally have in revolutionary societies actively engaged in ideological self-transformation. Posters mark off important public spaces. Thus, the vast Plaza de la Revolución, which can hold a million people for a rally, is largely defined by the huge colorful posters on the sides of the tall buildings bordering the Plaza. And posters signal important public times. Since the revolution each year is given a name in January (1969 was "The Year of the Decisive Effort," referring to the sugar harvest), and a poster announcing this is put up all over the island. Posters also supply a set of visual commentaries on the main political events in the course of the year: they announce days of solidarity with foreign struggles, publicize rallies and international congresses, commemorate historical anniversaries, and

so forth. But despite the plethora of official functions they fill, the posters have a remarkable grace. At least some political posters establish an astonishing degree of independent existence as decorative objects. As often as they convey a particular message, they simply express (through being beautiful) *pleasure* at certain ideas, moral attitudes, and ennobling historical references. For just one example, look on p. 22 at the poster "Cien Años de Lucha 1868-1968." The sobriety and refusal to make a statement in this poster is quite typical of what the Cubans have done. Of course, even the brief text of a poster can convey an analysis not just a slogan but a genuine piece of political analysis, like the Paris posters from May warning people against the ideological poisons of the press, radio, and television—one showed a crude drawing of a television set, above which was written "Intox!" The Cuban posters are much less analytic than the posters from the recent French revolution; they educate in a more indirect, emotional, graphically sensuous way. (Of course, Cuba lacks a tradition of intellectual analysis comparable to the French.) Rare are the political posters which do not involve some degree of moral flattery of their audience. The Cuban political posters flatter the senses. They are more stately, more dignified than the French posters from May 1968—which cultivated, for reasons of practical exigency as well as ideological motives, a raw, naïve, improvised, youthful look.

That posters of this deliberate aesthetic ambition appear frequently in Cuba, even that any are made at all, should hardly be taken for granted. The look that the Cuban posters aim at, and usually achieve, requires—besides talented artists—careful technical work, good paper, and other costly facilities. It is perhaps comprehensible that even a country coping with such severe economic shortages might allocate so much time and money and scarce paper to do political posters (and other forms of political graphics—like the exuberant layout of *Tricontinental* magazine, done by Alfredo Rostgaard, who makes most of the OSPAAAL posters). But the important educational role of political graphics in Cuba hardly explains altogether the high level, and expensive means, of Cuban poster art. For the Cuban poster is certainly not exclusively political, nor even (like the poster output of North Vietnam) mainly so. Many posters have no political content at all, and these include some of the most expensively and carefully produced posters—those done to advertise films. Advertising cultural events is the task of most of the altogether nonpolitical posters. In appealing, sometimes whimsical and sometimes dramatic, images and playful typography, these posters announce movies, plays, the visit of the Bolshoi Ballet, a national song contest, a gallery exhibit, and the like. Thus Cuban poster artists apparently perpetuate one of the earliest and most durable poster genres: the theatrical poster. But there is an important difference. The Cubans make posters to advertise culture in a society that seeks *not* to treat culture as an ensemble of commodities—events and objects designed, whether consciously or not, for commercial exploitation. Then the very project of cultural advertising becomes somewhat paradoxical, if not gratuitous. And indeed, many of these posters do not really fill any practical need. A beautiful poster made for the showing in Havana of, say, a minor movie by Alain Jessura, every performance of which will be sold out anyway (because movies are one of the few entertainments available), is a luxury item, something done in the end for its own sake. More often than not, a poster for ICAIC by Tony Reboiro or Eduardo Bachs amounts to the creation of a new work of art, supplementary to the film, rather than to a cultural advertisement in the familiar sense.

The élan and aesthetic self-sufficiency of the Cuban posters seem even more remarkable when one considers that the poster is itself a new art form in Cuba. Before



the revolution, the only posters to be seen in Cuba were the most vulgar types of American billboard advertising. Indeed, many of the pre-1959 posters in Havana had English texts, addressing themselves not even to the Cubans but directly to the American tourists whose dollars were a principal source of Cuba's earnings, and to the American residents, most of them businessmen who controlled and exploited Cuba's economy. Cuba, like most other Latin American countries—the weak exceptions are Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina—had no indigenous poster tradition. Now, the best posters made anywhere in Latin America come from Cuba. (The efflorescence of Cuban poster art in recent years is hardly known, however, due to the isolation of Cuba from the non-communist world imposed by American policy. Writing as recently as 1968, Hutchinson does not exempt Cuba from his general dismissal of Latin America as a place where posters of high quality originate.) What accounts for the extraordinary burst of talent and energy in this art form in particular? Needless to say, other arts beside the poster are practiced with great distinction in Cuba today—notably, prose literature and poetry, with flourishing traditions that long pre-date the revolution, and the cinema, which, like poster making, had no roots at all. But perhaps the poster provides, better than any other form at this time, an ideal medium for reconciling (or at least containing) two potentially antagonistic views of art. In one, art expresses and explores an individual sensibility. In the other, art serves a social-political or ethical aim. To the credit of the Cuban Revolution, the contradiction between these two views of art has *not* been resolved. And in the interim, the poster form is one where the clash is not so sharp.

Posters in Cuba are done by individual artists, most of whom are relatively young (born in the late 1930s and early 1940s) and some of whom, notably Raúl Martínez and Umberto Peña, were originally painters. There seems to be no impulse to make posters collectively, as they are made in China (along with most other art forms, including poetry) or as they were by the revolutionary students of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris in May 1968. But while Cuban posters, whether signed or unsigned, remain the work of individuals, most of these artists use a variety of individual styles. Stylistic eclecticism is perhaps one way of blurring the latent dilemma for the artist in a revolutionary society of having an individual signature. It is not easy to identify the work of Cuba's leading poster makers: Beltrán, Peña, Rostgaard, Reboiro, Azcuy Martínez, and Bachs. As an artist moves back and forth between designing a political poster for OSPAAAL one week and a film poster for ICAIC the next week, his style may change sharply. And this eclecticism within the work of individual poster artists characterizes, even more strikingly, the whole body of posters made in Cuba. They show a wide range of influences from abroad which include the doggedly personal styles of American poster makers like Saul Bass and Milton Glazer; the style of the Czech film posters from the 1960s by Josef Fléjar and Zdeněk Chotěnovský; the naïve style of the *Images d'Épinal*; the neo-Art Nouveau style popularized by the Fillmore and Avalon posters of the mid-1960s; and the Pop Art style, itself parasitic on commercial poster esthetics, of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Tom Wesselman.

Of course, the poster makers have an easier situation than some other artists in Cuba. They do not share in the burden inherited by literature, in which the pursuit of artistic excellence is partly defined in terms of a restriction of the audience. Literature, in the centuries since it ceased to be a primarily oral and therefore public art, has become increasingly identified with a solitary act (reading), with a withdrawal into a private self. Good literature can, and often does, appeal only to an educated

minority. Good posters cannot be an object of consumption by an elite. (What is properly called a poster implies a certain context of production and distribution, which excludes work, like the pseudo-posters of Warhol, produced directly for the fine arts market.) The space within which the genuine poster is shown is not elitist, but a public—communal—space. As they testify in numerous interviews, the Cuban poster artists remain very conscious that the poster is a public art, which addresses an undifferentiated mass of people *on behalf of* something public (whether a political idea or a cultural spectacle). The graphics artist in a revolutionary society doesn't have the problem the poet has, when the poet uses the singular voice, the lyrical *I* the problem of *who* is speaking and being spoken for.

Beyond a certain point, however, the place of the artist in a revolutionary society—no matter what his medium—is always a problematic. The modern view of the artist is rooted in the ideology of bourgeois capitalist society, with its highly elaborated notion of personal individuality and its presumption of a fundamental, ultimate antagonism between the individual and society. The further the notion of the individual is driven, the more acute becomes the polarization of individual versus society. And for well over a century, the artist has been precisely the extreme (or exemplary) case of the "isolated individual." The artist, according to the modern myth, is spontaneous, free, self-motivated—and frequently drawn to the role of the critic, or outsider, or disaffected nonparticipant. Thus, it has seemed self-evident to the leadership of every modern revolutionary government, or movement, that in a radically reconstructed social order the definition of the artist would have to change. Indeed, many artists in bourgeois society have denounced the confinement of art to small elite audiences (William Morris said: "I don't want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.") and the selfish privatism of many artists' lives. The criticism is easy to agree to in principle, hard to translate into practice. For one thing, most serious artists are quite attached to the "culturally revolutionary" role they play in societies which (they hope) are moving toward, but have not yet entered, a revolutionary situation. In a prerevolutionary situation, cultural revolution mainly consists of creating modes of *negative* experience and sensibility. It means making disruptions, refusals. This role is hard to give up, once one has become adept at it. Another particularly intransigent aspect of the artist's identity is the extent to which serious art has appropriated for itself the rhetoric of revolution. Work that pushes back the frontier of negativity is not only defined, throughout the modern history of the arts, as valuable and necessary. It is also defined as revolutionary, even though, contrary to the standards by which the merits of politically revolutionary acts is measured—popular appeal—the avant-garde artist's acts have tended to confine the audience for art to the socially privileged, to trained culture consumers. This cooption of the idea of revolution by the arts has introduced some dangerous confusions and encouraged misleading hopes.

It is natural for the artist—who is, so often, a critic of his society—to think when caught up in a revolutionary movement in his own country, that what he considers revolutionary in art is akin to the political revolution going on, and to believe that he can put his art at the service of the revolution. But so far there exists, at best, an uneasy union between revolutionary ideas in art and revolutionary ideas in politics. Virtually all the leaders in the great political revolutions have failed to see the connection at all, and indeed quickly sensed in revolutionary (modernist) art a disagreeable form of oppositional activity. Lenin's revolutionary politics coexisted with a distinctly retrograde literary taste. He loved Pushkin and Turgenev. He detested

Russian Futurists, and found Mayakovsky's bohemian life and experimental poetry an affront to the revolution's high moral ideals and spirit of collective sacrifice. Even Trotsky, far more sophisticated about the arts than Lenin, wrote (in 1923) that the Futurists stood apart from the revolution, though he believed they could be integrated. As everyone knows, the career of revolutionary art in the Soviet Union was extremely short-lived. The final fling of "formalist" painting in post-revolutionary Russia was the Moscow group exhibition " $5 \times 5 = 25$ " in 1921. The decisive step away from nonrepresentational art was taken that year. As the decade wore on, the situation worsened steadily, and the government banned the Futurist artists. A few of the great avant-garde geniuses of the 1920s were allowed to continue working, but under conditions which promoted the coarsening of their talents (like Eisenstein and Djiga Vertov). Many were intimidated into silence; others chose suicide or exile; some (like Mandelstam, Babel, and Meyerhold) were eventually sent to death in labor camps.

In the context of all these problems and disastrous historical precedents, the Cubans have taken a modest tack. The debate on Cuban graphic art in the July 1969 issue of *Cuba Internaccional*, cited later in this book by Dugald Stermer, goes over the traditional problems raised by the task of reconceiving art in a revolutionary society, of determining what are the legitimate freedoms and responsibilities of the artist. One-sided options are condemned; pure utilitarianism as well as pure aestheticism, the frivolity of self-indulgent abstractness as well as the aesthetic poverty of banal realism. The usual civilized pieties are advanced: the wish to avoid sledge-hammer propagandism but to remain relevant and understandable. It is the same old discussion. (For a more ample discussion, with reference to all the arts, see issue #4, from December 1967, of *Unión*, the magazine published by the Union of Writers and Artists.) The analysis is not particularly original. What is impressive, and heartening, is the Cuban solution; not to come to any particular solution, *not* to put great pressure on the artist. The debate continues, and so does the high quality of the Cuban posters. Comparisons with the poster art of the Soviet Union for more than forty years—indeed with the public propagandistic art of all the countries of Eastern Europe—puts in an almost monotonously favorable light the Cuban government's achievement in resisting an ethically and esthetically philistine treatment of its artists. The Cuban way with artists is pragmatic, and largely respectful.

Admittedly, one cannot take the relatively happy relation of the poster artists to the revolution as uniformly typical of the situation of artists in Cuba. Among all the Cuban artists, the poster makers have a particularly easy time integrating their identity as artists with the demands and appeals of the revolution. Every society in the throes of revolution puts a heavy demand on art to have some connection with public values. The poster maker has no fundamental difficulty in acceding to this demand, posters being both an art form and also an extremely literal means of creating values. After the poster, the art form that seems almost as comfortable with this demand is the cinema—as evidenced by the remarkable work of Santiago Alvarez and the young directors of feature films. With other art forms, the situation is less unequivocal. As relatively permissive toward artists as the Cuban Revolution is, more individual voices (even among artists whose commitment to the revolution is unquestionable) have run into opposition. Last year, ugly pressures were brought to bear on Hubert Padilla, probably the best of the younger poets. It should be mentioned that during Padilla's ordeal, which included being attacked in the press, temporarily losing his government job, and having his book, after it received a prize from the Casa de las Americas, printed with a preface criticizing the award of the prize to him, there was never any question

of refusing the print his book, of censoring his poetry—much less of jailing him. One hopes, and has good reason to believe, that the Padilla case is an exception; though it is perhaps significant that Padilla was not totally vindicated, and did not get his job back, until Castro personally intervened in the matter. Lyric poetry, the most private of arts, is perhaps the most vulnerable in a revolutionary society as poster making is the most adaptable. But this is hardly to say that only poets can be frustrated in Cuba. The conflict between aesthetic and sheerly practical, even more than ideological, considerations has created problems even for the other public arts—for example, architecture. Probably, Cuba simply cannot afford buildings like the School of Fine Arts in the suburbs of Havana done by Ricardo Porro in 1965, which is one of the most beautiful modern structures in the world. The priority now given to the design of, say, aesthetically banal low-cost prefabricated houses over the construction of another original, glamorous, and expensive building like that one is hardly unreasonable. But the conflict of utility (and economic rationality) versus beauty seems hardly to have affected the policy toward posters—perhaps because poster production represents much less of an expenditure, and seems more obviously useful; and because “individuality” is traditionally a less important norm of poster esthetics than it is in modern literature, cinema, or architecture.

In their beauty, their stylishness, and their transcendence of either mere utility or mere propaganda, these posters give evidence of a revolutionary society that is not repressive and philistine. The posters demonstrate that Cuba has a culture that is alive, international in orientation, and relatively free of the kind of bureaucratic interference that has blighted the arts in practically every other country where a communist revolution has come to power. Still, one cannot automatically take these attractive aspects of the Cuban Revolution as an organic part of revolutionary ideology and practice. It could be argued that the relatively high degree of freedom enjoyed by Cuban artists, however admirable, is not part of a revolutionary redefinition of the artist, but does no more than perpetuate one of the highest values claimed for the artist in bourgeois society. More generally, the liveliness and openness of Cuban culture does not mean that Cuba necessarily possesses a revolutionary culture.

Cuban posters reflect the revolutionary communist ethic of Cuba in one obvious respect, of course. Every revolutionary society seeks to limit the type, if not the content, of public signs (if not actually to assure centralized control over them)—a limitation that follows logically on the rejection of the consumer society, with its phony free-choice among goods clamoring to be bought and entertainments demanding to be sampled. But are the Cuban posters “revolutionary” in any further sense than this? As has already been noted, they are not revolutionary as that idea is used by the modernist movement in the arts. Good as they are, the Cuban posters are not artistically radical or revolutionary. They are too eclectic for that. (But perhaps no posters are, given the tradition of stylistic parasitism in poster-making of all genres.) Neither can they be considered manifestations of a politically revolutionary conception of art, beyond the fact that many though hardly all of the posters illustrate the political ideas, memories, and hopes of the revolution.

Cuba has not solved the problem of creating a new, revolutionary art for a new, revolutionary society—assuming that indeed a revolutionary society *needs* its own kind of art. Some radicals, of course, believe that it does not, that it is a mistake to think that a revolutionary society needs a revolutionary art (as bourgeois society had bourgeois art). In this view, the revolution need not and should not reject bourgeois culture since this culture, in the arts as well as the sciences, is in fact the



highest form of culture. All that the revolution should do with bourgeois culture is democratize it, making it available to everyone and not just a socially privileged minority. It is an attractive argument, but unfortunately too unhistorical to be convincing. Undoubtedly, there are many elements of the culture of bourgeois society that should be retained and incorporated into a revolutionary society. But one cannot ignore the sociological roots and ideological function of that culture. From a historical perspective, it seems much more likely that, precisely as bourgeois society achieved its remarkable "hegemony" through the splendid achievements of bourgeois culture, a revolutionary society must establish new, equally persuasive and complex forms of culture. Indeed, according to the great Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci—the foremost exponent of this view—the very overthrow of the bourgeois state must wait until there is first a nonviolent revolution in civil society. Culture, more than the strictly political and economic institutions of the state, is the medium of this necessary civil revolution. It is, above all, a change in people's perceptions of themselves, which is created by culture. It is self-evident to Gramsci that the revolution demands a new culture.

In Gramsci's sense of a change of culture, Cuban poster art does not embody radically new values. The values represented in the posters are internationalism, diversity, eclecticism, moral seriousness, commitment to artistic excellence, sensuality—the positive sum of Cuba's refusal of philistinism or crude utilitarianism. These are mainly *critical* values, arrived at by rejecting two opposing models: the vulgar commerciality of American poster art (and its imitations in the billboards multiplying throughout Western Europe and Latin America), on the one side, and the drab ugliness of Soviet socialist realism and the folkloric and hagiographic naïveté of Chinese political graphics, on the other. Nevertheless, the fact that these are critical values, those of a society in transition, does not mean they cannot be, in a stronger or special context, also revolutionary values.

Talking about revolutionary values in the abstract, without being historically specific, is superficial. In Cuba, one of the most powerful revolutionary values is internationalism. The promotion of internationalist consciousness plays almost as large a role in Cuba as the promotion of nationalist consciousness plays in most other left-revolutionary societies (like North Vietnam, North Korea, and China) and insurgent movements. The revolutionary élan of Cuba is profoundly rooted in its *not* settling for the achievements of a national revolution, but being passionately committed to the cause of revolution on a global scale. Thus Cuba is probably the only communist country in the world where people really care about Vietnam. Ordinary citizens, as well as public officials, frequently make a point of belittling the severity of their own struggle and hardships, comparing them with those endured for decades by the Vietnamese. Among the mammoth posters that dominate the great Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, equal prominence is given to a poster of Che, a poster honoring the struggle of the Vietnamese people, and a poster hailing the goal of ten million tons for the 1970 sugar harvest. Those posters which illustrate Cuba's own revolutionary history are not intended simply to inspire patriotic feeling, but to demonstrate the Cuban link with international struggle. Equal in importance on the political calendar to the days commemorating the martyrdoms in Cuba's own history are the days of solidarity with other peoples, for each of which a poster is designed. (Examples, in this book, are posters for the days of solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe, of the United States' black colony, of Latin America, and of Vietnam.) An inverse measure of this theme of solidarity is the fact that the Cuban political posters rarely divide the world into black

and white, friends and enemies—like the “Love the Fatherland” posters in East Germany, or the Vietnamese poster images of the American “pirate aggressor.” The imagery on the Cuban political posters is almost always affirmative, without being sentimental. Practically none are devoted to invective or caricature. As few of them resort to crude exhortation, practically none depend on Manichean moral polarizing.

Thus, even the very eclecticism of the Cuban poster artists has a political dimension, in that it too reaffirms Cuba’s distinctive refusal of national chauvinism. The claims of the nationalist versus the internationalist perspective is perhaps the most acute issue in Cuban art today. In almost all the arts, there is a sharp division of attitude on this issue, which tends to run—like so many conflicts these days—along generational lines. The rule seems to be that whatever the art form, the older generation tends to be nationalist, that is, folkloric, more “realistic,” while the younger generation tends to be internationally minded, avant-garde, “abstract.” In music, for instance, the split is particularly severe. The younger composers are drawn to Boulez and Henze, while the older composers press for a distinctively Cuban music based on Afro-Cuban rhythms and instrumentation and the *danson* tradition. But in the poster, as in the cinema, such a split hardly exists—a fact which may have helped to make these art forms particularly distinguished in Cuba now. Nobody from an older generation is making movies, because the only movies made before 1959 were stag films (Cuba was North America’s principal supplier). In less than a decade, the new Cuban film industry has already turned out several very good feature-length fiction films and some impressive short films and documentaries. All Cuban films reflect a diverse range of foreign influences, both from the European art cinema and the American underground. And all Cuban poster art, also lacking any roots prior to the revolution and similarly free of a conflict between older and younger artists, is international in influence.

Contrary to what older artists in Cuba often allege, it is internationalism—not nationalism—in art which best serves the revolution’s cause, even its secondary task of building a proper sense of national pride. Cuba suffers profoundly from a complex of underdevelopment, as the novelist Edmundo Desnoes has called it. This is not just a national neurosis, but a real historical fact. One cannot overestimate the damage influenced on Cuba by American cultural, as well as economic, imperialism. Now, though isolated and besieged by the United States, Cuba is open to the whole world. Internationalism is the most effective and most liberating response to the problem of Cuba’s cultural lag. The fact that the theaters in Havana play Albee as well as Brecht is neither a sign that the Cubans are still hung-up on bourgeois art nor a symptom of revisionist soft-mindedness (as a similar-looking cultural policy is in nonmilitant Yugoslavia). It is a revolutionary act for Cuba, at this historical moment, to continue to accommodate works of bourgeois culture from all over the world, and to draw on the aesthetic styles perfected in bourgeois culture. This accommodation does not mean that the Cubans don’t want a cultural revolution, but only that they are pursuing this goal in their own terms, according to their own experience and needs. There can be no universal recipe for cultural revolution. And in determining what a cultural revolution would mean for a given country, one must take into particular account the available resources of the national past. Cultural revolution in China, with its magnificent culture stretching back through the millennia of history, must necessarily have different norms than a cultural revolution in Cuba. Apart from the strong survivals of Yoruba and other African tribal cultures, Cuba possesses only the bastardized remnants of the culture of oppressors—first the Spanish, then the Americans. Cuba has no long, prideful national history to look back on, as do the Vietnamese. The history of the

country is little else than the history of one hundred years of struggle, from Martí and Maceo to Fidel and Che. Becoming international is then Cuba's indigenous path to cultural revolution.

This concept of cultural revolution is, of course, not the usual one. Far more common is the view which assigns to art in a revolutionary society the task of purifying, renewing, and glorifying the culture. Such a demand on art is a familiar part of the program of most fascist regimes, from Germany and Italy in the 1930s to the Greek colonels today, as well as of Soviet Russia for over forty years. In its overtly fascist form, this project is usually conceived along strictly nationalist lines. Cultural revolution means national purification: eliminating unassimilable, dissonant art from the nation's cultural past and foreign corruptions of the country's language. It means national self-renewal, that is, reconceiving the nation's past so that it seems to lend support to the new goals proposed by the revolution. Such a program for cultural revolution always criticizes the old bourgeois culture of the prerevolutionary society as being both elitist and essentially empty, ephemeral, or formalist. This culture must be purged. A new culture is summoned to take its place, one that all citizens will be capable of appreciating, whose function will be to increase the individual's identification with the nation, to simplify consciousness in the hope of reducing private disaffection (by reducing the dissonance of ideas and moods and styles in the country), and to promote civic virtue.<sup>1</sup> This, perhaps the most common notion of cultural revolution, is the policy not only of fascist revolutions, but, all too often, of societies that have mounted revolutions from the left. But genuine left-revolutionary societies and movements have, or ought to have, a quite different notion of cultural revolution. The proper goal of a left-wing cultural revolution is not to increase national pride, but to transcend it. Such a revolution would not seek to systematically revive old cultural forms (nor practice selective censorship of the past), but to invent new forms. Its purpose would not be to renew or purify consciousness, but to change it—to raise or educate people to a new consciousness.

According to the view of some radicals, the only authentic forms of revolutionary art are those produced (and experienced) collectively; or at least, it is felt, revolutionary art forms cannot wholly originate from the work of a single individual. In this view, the organizing of collective spectacles would be the quintessential form of revolutionary art—from the spectacles celebrating the Goddess of Reason devised by Jacques-Louis David during the French Revolution to the long Chinese film epic of the early 1960s, *The East is Red*. But the example of Cuba, which has pretty much rejected the organization of spectacles as a valuable form of revolutionary activity, leads one to question this view. Spectacle, the favorite public art form of most revolutionary societies, whether of the right or the left, is implicitly understood by the Cubans as repressive. What replaces a taste for revolutionary spectacle is the fascination with the scenario of revolutionary action. It may be the scenario of a great public project, like the anti-illiteracy campaign in 1960, the settling by militant youth of the Isle of Pines, and the 1970 sugar harvest. (In such projects, the whole population, as far as it is feasible, participates—but not as something seen, something organized for the eye of a viewer.) Or it may be the scenario of an exemplary struggle by an individual, in the history of Cuban liberation, or by a movement abroad with whose agon the Cubans identify and by whose victories they feel morally nourished. What interests the Cubans, as a resource for political art, is the dramatically exemplary aspect of radical activity. The dramatically valid spectacle may be the life and death of Che, or the Vietnamese struggle, or the ordeal of Bobby Seale. For radical activity can take

place anywhere, everywhere—not just in Cuba. This is the fundamental dramaturgic identification that fuels their internationalism.

In this political conception, poster art plays a particularly useful, compact role. Political posters in Cuba give a lexicon of the important scenarios—the struggle of blacks in the United States, the guerrilla movement in Mozambique, Vietnam, and so forth, down a long list—which are going on right now. The retrospective themes of many of the Cuban posters are no less international in orientation. A poster asking people to remember the victims of Hiroshima has the same purpose as a poster recalling the martyrs of the Moncada assault in 1956 which launched the Cuban revolution. Political posters in Cuba function to enlarge moral consciousness, to attach the sense of moral responsibility to an *increasing* number of issues. This enterprise may be regarded as impractical, gratuitous, even quixotic for a small, beleaguered island of seven million people barely managing to subsist under the American siege. The same spirit of gratuitousness is revealed, in a specific instance, in the decision to make beautiful posters advertising cultural events which everyone wants to see and will attend anyway. One only hopes the Cuban genius for the impractical moral ambition, for limited, seemingly arbitrary, yet extravagant gratifications of the senses—from the posters to the Coppelia ice-cream palaces—can be sustained, that it will not diminish. For just this taste for the gratuitous gives life in Cuba a feeling of spaciousness, despite all the severe internal and external restraints; and gives the Cuban Revolution, more than any other communist revolution in progress, its inventiveness, youth, humor, and extravagance.

### III.

If the task of a cultural revolution and of conceiving a politically revolutionary role for artists is full of difficulties and contradictions *within* the context of an ongoing political revolution, the prospects for a genuine cultural revolution outside (or before) a political one are even more problematic. The history of virtually all the ostensibly revolutionary movements in art and culture to have arisen in non- or prerevolutionary societies is hardly encouraging. It is, more or less, simply the history of cooption. The fate of the Bauhaus movement is only one example, among many, of how revolutionary forms of culture arising within bourgeois society are first attacked, then neutralized, and finally absorbed by that society. Capitalism transforms all objects, including art, into commodities. And the poster—including the revolutionary poster—is hardly exempt from this iron rule of cooption.

At the present time, poster art is in a period of renaissance. Posters have come to be regarded as mysterious cultural objects, whose flatness and literalness only deepen their resonance, as well as inexhaustibly rich emblems of the society. In recent years, the eye of film-makers has turned more and more to posters. They appear as magical, partly opaque references; think of the use of posters as key objects in almost all Godard's films. They are cited as eloquent and exact sociological and moral evidence; a recent example is Antonioni's tour of Los Angeles billboard fantasies in the early part of *Zabriskie Point*. (This new, enriched role of the poster in movie iconology since 1960 has little to do with the traditional use of the poster in cinema narrative—to convey briefly some necessary information—that begins with the shot of the poster of Irma Vep, played by Musidora, in Feuillade's *Les Vampires* [1915].) But the extent to which poster images come to be more and more frequently incorporated within other arts is only one, fairly specialized, index of interest. Posters have appeared increasingly interesting not only as points of reference, but as objects in themselves.



Posters have become one of the most ubiquitous kinds of cultural objects—prized partly because they are cheap, unpretentious, “popular” art. The current renaissance of poster art derives its strength less from any more original type of production or more intensive public use of posters than from the astonishing surge of interest in collecting posters, in domesticating them.

The current interest differs in several ways from the first wave of poster collecting, which started two decades after posters began to appear. First, it is simply much bigger in scale, as befits a later, more advanced stage in the era of mechanical reproduction. Poster-collecting in the 1890s may have been fashionable, but it was hardly, as it is now, a mass addiction. Second, a much broader range of posters is being collected. The collections of the 1890s tended to be from the collector's own country. Recent poster collections tend to be ostentatiously international. And it is hardly accidental that the beginning of the craze for collecting posters, in the mid-1950s, coincides with the rising tide of postwar American tourism in Europe, which has now made regular trips across the Atlantic as banal a prerogative of middle-class life here as vacations at American seaside resorts had been in an earlier age. This archetypal public object, once collected by only a small band of connoisseurs, has now become a standard private object in the living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens of the young American and European bourgeoisie. In such collections, the poster is not simply—as it once was—a new, exotic kind of art object. It has a more special function. As poster art is itself usually parasitic on other forms of art, the new fashion of collecting posters constitutes a meta-parasitism—on the world itself, or a highly stylized image of it. Posters furnish a portable image of the world. A poster is like a miniature of an event: a quotation—from life, or from high art. Modern poster-collecting is related to the modern phenomenon of mass tourism. As collected now, the poster becomes a souvenir of an event. But between the poster of El Codobes or the great Rembrandt retrospective hanging on the wall and the photographs the middle-class tourist took of his summer vacation in Italy mounted in an album, there is one important difference. Somebody had to be there to take the photographs; nobody had to go to Seville or Amsterdam to buy the poster. More often than not, the collector never actually visited the art exhibit or attended the bullfight advertised in the posters he has hanging on his wall. The posters are, rather, substitutes for experience. Like the photographs taken by a tourist, the poster functions as a souvenir of an event. But the event is often which has taken place in the past and which the collector first learns about when he acquires the poster. Since what the poster illustrates is often not part of his personal history, the collection becomes instead a set of souvenirs of imaginary experiences.

What spectacles and events and people one has chosen to hang in miniaturized form on one's wall does not merely constitute a facile kind of vicarious experience. It is also, plainly, a form of homage. By means of posters, everyone can easily and quickly select a personal pantheon—even if he cannot be said to have created it, since most poster buyers are confined to choosing among the numerically limited, already selected assortment of mass-produced posters offered for sale. What posters one choose to nail up in his living room indicates, as clearly as his choice of a painting might have in the past, the *taste* of the owner of the private space. It is, sometimes, a form of cultural boasting—a particularly cheap example of a use to which culture has traditionally been put in all class societies: to indicate or affirm or lay claim to a given social status. Often the purpose is more cool, less pushy than this. As a cultural trophy, the display of a poster in one's private space is, at the very least, a clear means of

self-identification to visitors, a code (for those who know it) by which the various members of a cultural subgroup announced themselves to each other and recognized each other. The display of good taste in the old bourgeois sense has given way to the display of a kind of calculated bad taste—which, when it accords with or is just in advance of fashion, becomes a sign of good taste. One does not necessarily lend one's approval to the subjects represented in the posters hanging on his walls. It suffices that one indicates an awareness of the worldly value, with some nuances, of these subjects. In this complex sense posters become, when collected, a cultural trophy. Far from indicating any simple approval or identification with the subject, the range of posters displayed in someone's private space may mean no more than a kind of lexicon of nostalgia and irony.

As might be expected, even in the relatively brief history of the modern revival of poster collecting, the choice of the kind of posters to hang is subject to marked changes in fashion. The bullfight posters and posters of Paris art exhibitions, almost ubiquitous a decade ago, evidence rear-guard taste now. Some time ago these were overtaken by Mucha posters and by old movie posters (the older the better; Saul Bass posters from the 1950s are too recent). Then came the vogue of posters advertising exhibits by American not European artists (for example, the famous posters of Warhol, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Lichtenstein shows). After that came the rock ballroom posters, which were succeeded by the head posters, for looking at when stoned. Starting in the late 1960s, a major part of collecting interest has shifted to radical political posters. It seems odd, at first, that the radical political poster has such apparently diverse uses. It appeals to the populations of economically under-developed, ex-colonial societies, many of whom can barely read. It also appeals to the most literate young people in the most advanced industrial nation, the United States, who have challenged the preeminence of discursive language in favor of more emotive, nonverbal forms of saying.

In the succession of poster fashions it is rare for one type of poster to displace another. Rather, the interest in a new poster subject is added on to the already existing interest in others. So the audience grows. Every big city in America and most major cities in Europe now have numerous places where posters can be bought. The head shop is one type of outlet common in the United States; its distinctive, if narrow, mixture of wares includes—besides posters—cigarette papers, pipes, roach holders, strobe and op lights, peace symbol jewelry, and buttons printed with satiric, insolent, or obscene slogans. Posters are now sold in the rear of discount bookstores and some metropolitan drug stores. For more serious or at least more affluent collectors, stores like Posters Original Unlimited in New York City stock only posters; these come from all over the world. Recently, though, the mass printing of large blow-ups of photographs has somewhat cut into the poster market, while serving much the same function. These poster-size photographs are even cheaper, and therefore more widely sold, than the mass-reproduced reprint runs of posters. Perhaps, too, the poster-size photograph is inherently more attractive than a poster to many younger people—members of a generation marked by its profound experiences of nonverbal psychic states, notably through rock music and drugs—because it is a pure image: direct, frontal. The photograph posters are more neutral, more low-keyed, simply by virtue of always being black-and-white, than posters, which have colors. Posters still carry some residual traces of their origin in, and influences by, high arts such as painting. But the big blow-up photographs of famous people that are now being hung up on the wall, poster fashion, are about as neutral and impersonal as any image can be (though the image is of a person), and carry not the slightest stigma of art.

In collecting posters, there seems to be no risk of cultural indigestion. As in the crowded, haphazard arrangements of public space for which posters are originally designed, each poster in the collector's casual private space is innocent of its neighbor. A reprint of a poster from the Russian Revolution, bought at a Marboro bookstore, may hang alongside a poster sold at the Museum of Modern Art of its Magritte show several years ago. The same eclecticism, the same disregard of any notion of compatibility, marks the use of poster-size photographs. These are almost all photographs of celebrities, a category into which Huey Newton is fitted as easily as Garbo. Radical political leaders have the same status as movie stars. Though one comes from the world of politics and the other from the world of entertainment, both are celebrities, both are beautiful. This standard, of popularity or glamour, by which photographs are selected for reproduction in poster-size and marketed is reflected in their use. The poster is an icon—as it is in Cuba, where practically every home and office building has at least one poster of Che. But in the contemporary style of collecting posters (and poster-size photographs) almost uniform throughout the capitalist world, from Boston to Berlin, from Madison to Milan, the icons represent many kinds of admiration. These juxtapositions, whereby Ho Chi Minh is in the bathroom and Bogart is in the bedroom, while W. C. Fields hangs next to Marx over the dining room table, produces a kind of moral vertigo. Such morally startling collages indicate a very particular way of viewing the world, now endemic among the educated young bourgeois of America and Western Europe, that is one part sentimentality, one part irony, one part detachment.

Thus, collecting posters is related to tourism in yet another way than the one already mentioned. Modern tourism may be described as a means for a kind of symbolic appropriation of other cultures which takes place in a brief time, conducted in a state of functional alienation from (or nonparticipation in) the life of the country visited. Countries are reduced to places of "interest," and these are listed in guidebooks and graded. This procedure allows the tourist, once he has touched on these principal places, to feel he has actually had contact with the country visited. That specifically modern (indeed post-World War II) way of traveling which is modern mass tourism is something quite different from foreign travel as understood in earlier periods of bourgeois culture. Unlike travel in its traditional forms, modern tourism turns traveling into something more like buying. The traveler accumulates countries visited as he accumulates consumer goods. The process involves no commitment, and one experience never contradicts or excludes or genuinely modifies the one that came before or will come after. This is exactly the form of the modern avidity for the poster. Collecting posters is a species of emotional and moral tourism, a taste for which precludes, or at least contradicts, serious political commitment. The collecting of posters is a way of anthologizing the world, in such a fashion that one emotion or loyalty tends to cancel out another. Events and human beings represented in a poster are miniaturized or scaled down in a stronger sense than the literal, graphic one. The desire to miniaturize events and people incarnated in the current vogue of poster-collecting in bourgeois society is a desire to scale down the world itself, particularly what is alluring and disturbing in it.

In the case of radical political posters, this miniaturization of the events or persons incarnated in poster-collecting represents a subtle or not so subtle form of cooption. The poster, at its origins a means of selling a commodity, is itself turned into a commodity. The same process is taking place in the publication of this book—which involves a double reproduction (and miniaturization) of the Cuban posters. First, an

anthology is made of the available Cuban posters. Then, those which have been chosen are reproduced in a scaled-down size. This group of posters is then converted into a new medium, a book, which is prefaced, typographically packaged, printed, distributed, and sold. The present use made of the Cuban posters is thus at least several steps away from its original use, and involves a tacit betrayal of that use. For, whatever their ultimate artistic and political value, the Cuban posters arise from the genuine situation of a people undergoing profound revolutionary change. Those who produce this book, those like most people who will buy it and read it, live in counter-revolutionary societies, societies with a flair for ripping any object out of context and turning it into an object of consumption. Thus, it would not be altogether just to praise those who have made this book. Especially Cuba's foreign friends, as well as those who merely lean toward a favorable view of the Cuban Revolution, should not feel altogether comfortable as they look through it. The book is itself a good example of how all things in this society get turned into commodities, into forms of (usually) miniaturized spectacle and into objects of consumption. It is not possible, say, simply to regard the "contents" of this book with sympathy, because the notion that the Cuban posters make up the book's content is really a spurious one. However much those who have made this book may like to think of it simply as presenting the poster art of Cuba, to a wider audience than ever before, the fact remains that the Cuban posters reproduced in this book have thereby been converted into something other than what they are—or were ever meant to be. They are now cultural objects, offered up for our delectation. They have become one more item in the cultural smorgasbord provided in affluent bourgeois society. Such feasting eventually dulls all capacity for real commitment, while the left-liberal bourgeoisie of such countries is lulled into thinking that it is learning something, having its commitments and sympathies extended.

There is no way out of the trap, of course, as long as we—with our unlimited resources for waste, for destruction, and for mechanical reproductions—are here, and the Cubans are there. No way out is possible as long as we are curious, as long as we remain intoxicated with cultural good, as long as we live inside our restless, negative sensibilities. The corruption embodied in this book is subtle, scarcely unique, and in the sum of things hardly even important. But is a real corruption nevertheless. *Caveat emptor, Viva Fidel.*

*First published in Dugald Stermer, The Art of Revolution: 96 Posters from Cuba (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).*

#### Notes

1. A concise, and little known, example of this idea of cultural revolution is the speech Pirandello gave in Rome in October 1935, in the presence of Mussolini, at the inauguration of the new theatrical season at the Teatro Argentina. It can be found in the *Tulane Drama Review* #44. . . . A less emphatically nationalist form of this right-wing conception of cultural revolution is used by conservatives, like André Mairaux during his tenure as Minister of Culture under De Gaulle. For a devastating analysis of Mairaux' conception of bringing elite culture to the masses, and of the ideological purposes of the Gaullist conservative politics of culture, see the essay by Violette Morin, "Le culture majuscule: André Mairaux," in *Communications* #14, 1969.