

Does Che deserve his iconic T-shirt?

Author: Angela Li



“It would appear that if Che was alive, he would be barred from his own exhibition.”

In 2006, the curator of a major exhibition on Che Guevara at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London invited Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams to attend its opening. The museum overruled the invitation by declaring Adams “neither relevant nor appropriate,” to which Adams retorted with the above quote (Campbell). The irony of the decision lies in the fact that Adams, a controversial political figure associated with revolutionary republicanism, was excluded from an exhibition celebrating another controversial revolutionary figure.

Cultural symbols expressing dissent seem to be facing a similar problem. Modern institutions were willing to celebrate Che Guevara’s image, but far less comfortable with the forms of political radicalism that made him famous. More than four decades after his death, Che had become acceptable not as a revolutionary, but as a symbol.

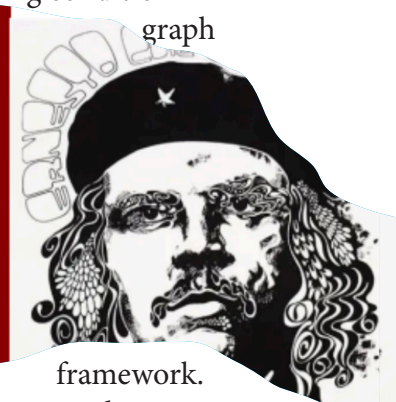
Few political figures have undergone a transformation as remarkable as Ernesto “Che” Guevara. During his lifetime, Che was known as a revolutionary guerrilla, a Marxist internationalist, and a leading figure in the Cuban Revolution. Today, however, he is perhaps better known as the face on fashion items such as T-shirts worn by celebrities and commoners alike. Some comfortably wear this aesthetic symbol of rebellion and idealism, while others despise the hypocrisy of an opponent of capitalism transformed into a commercial brand. To determine whether Che deserves his iconic T-shirt, one must examine the relationship between the historical Che, the photographed Che, and the commercial symbol which the photograph has evolved into. What makes Che’s photo iconic in the first place?

Communication scholars Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites define iconic photographs as: “photographic images produced in print, electronic, or digital media that are

- (1) recognized by everyone within a public culture,
- (2) understood to be representations of historically significant events,
- (3) objects of strong emotional identification and response, and
- (4) regularly reproduced or copied across a range of media, genres, and topics.”

Through discussing how Che's iconic photograph gradually changes and fulfills each of the above conditions over the course of history, this essay argues that the symbol of Che was created and became distributable because of the rhetorical appeal of his photograph and his commitment to the revolutionary cause. However, he does not deserve the iconic T-shirt because the commodification of his image detaches itself from the historical individual and contradicts the political ideology he represented.

The Political Memory of the Photograph



To understand why Che's photograph became iconic, it is first necessary to understand why Che himself became iconic. The photograph that would later become known as Guerrillero Heroico was taken on 5 March 1960 during a memorial service for victims of the La Coubre explosion in Havana. The French cargo ship La Coubre, which was carrying weapons for the Cuban government, exploded in Havana Harbor and killed dozens of people. Che, who had trained as a doctor before joining the Cuban Revolution, reportedly interrupted political work to assist the wounded. During the memorial ceremony, former fashion photographer Alberto Korda captured a brief photograph of Che looking into the distance. This historical situation fulfills condition of the iconic photograph framework.

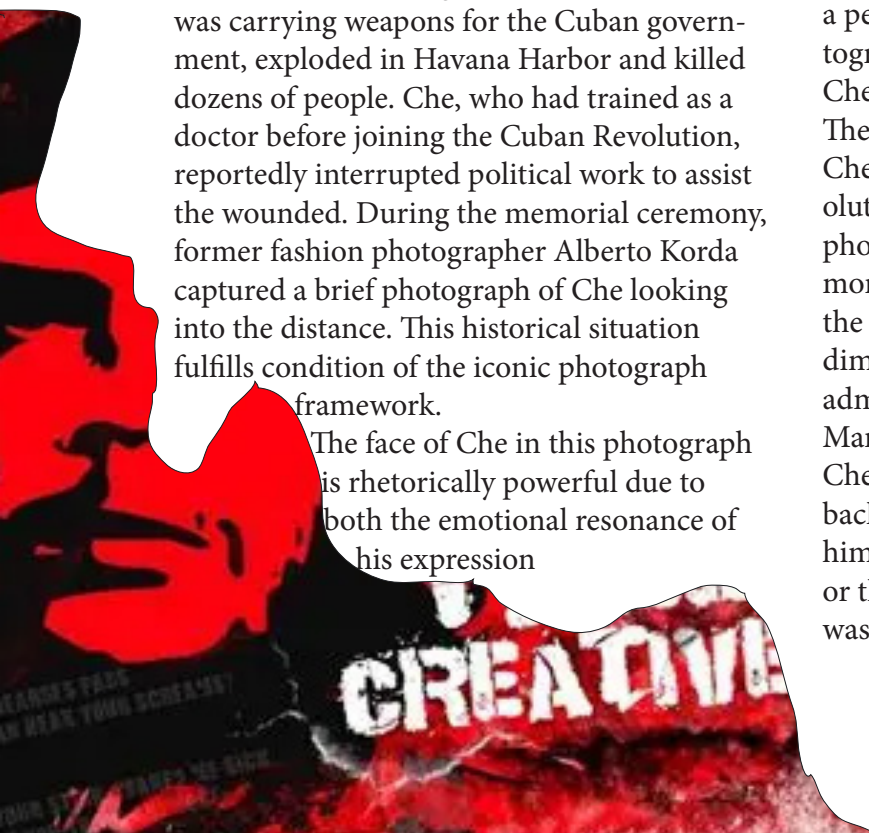
The face of Che in this photograph is rhetorically powerful due to both the emotional resonance of his expression

—described by Korda as “angry and pained” — and the personal appeal of Che which embodies an individual completely devoted to a cause larger than himself. The source of his symbolic power was the widespread perception that Che genuinely believed in the ideals for which he fought. Che firmly acted according to his belief that the true revolutionary is motivated by a “great feeling of love” for the oppressed. Rather than settling down with a position in Fidel Castro's revolutionary regime, he abandoned his position to commit himself entirely to guerrilla warfare and the cause of national liberation in South America. This consistency between belief and action gave him the universal appeal of moral authenticity which transcended ideological divisions and became capable of symbolizing the revolutionary spirit, satisfying condition of the iconic photo-

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framework.

As cultural critic John Berger argues, photographs do not only record reality, but also help shape collective memory. They encourage audiences to remember particular aspects of a person while forgetting others. In his photograph, Korda presented a specific version of Che that emphasized his spirit over his career. The photograph easily invokes associations with Che's determination, defiance, sacrifice, and revolutionary conviction when one considers the photograph's historical context as well as Che's moral authority and emotional expression. At the same time, the photograph obscured other dimensions of Che's identity as a government administrator, economic planner, diplomat, and Marxist theorist. Korda's composition places Che at the center of the frame, while the sparse background and partial figures surrounding him provide little context about his political role or the memorial ceremony at which the photo was taken. As a result, viewers perceive not a



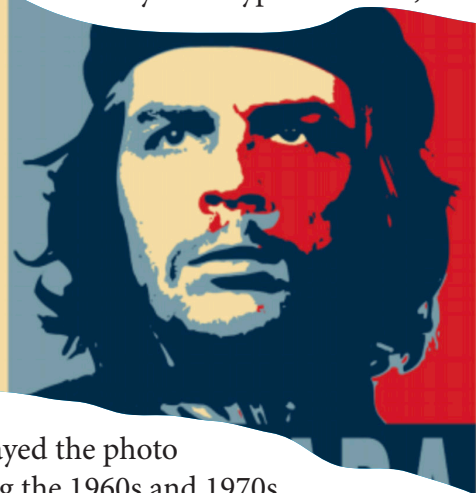
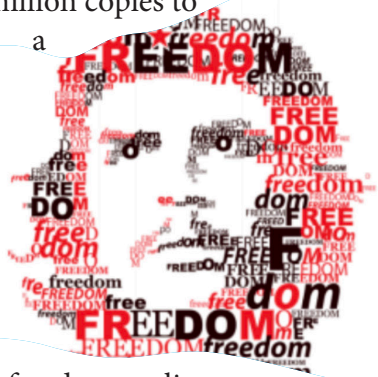
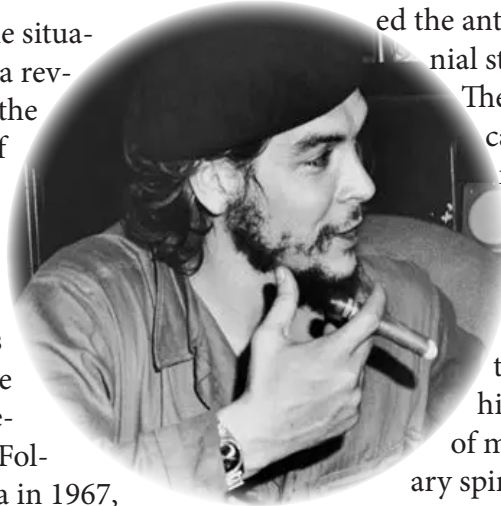
specific historical actor but a timeless, heroic revolutionary figure. This relative detachment from context made Che in this photo particularly susceptible to mythologization and enabled it to circulate as a symbol that extended far beyond the historical Che himself.

The timing of Che's death was the situation that transformed him from a revolutionary leader into a martyr; the simultaneous mass circulation of his photo allowed it to circulate far beyond Cuba and turn into a symbol of rebellion. During the 1960s, anti-colonial struggles, student protests, civil rights campaigns, and opposition to the Vietnam War created a global demand for symbols of resistance. Following Che's execution in Bolivia in 1967, Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli acquired a copy of Korda's photograph and reproduced over one million copies to meet

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The photo of Che came to symbolize rebellion itself rather than any specific political programme. Through widespread distribution, the historical context of Che's photo began to separate from the man himself. By becoming an icon of martyrdom of the revolutionary spirit of the Cuban Revolution and being used in the context of different revolutions, reproduction simplified Che into a revolutionary archetype. However, those who



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sive wave of public grief and soli-
darity. Simultaneously in the underground political sphere, Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick transformed Korda's photograph into the famous red-and-black silkscreen poster and deliberately refused copyright because he wanted the image to "breed like rabbits." Distributed across Europe as posters, prints, and political materials in 1968, the photograph of Che was prominently displayed on placards and banners in major international demonstrations such as the May student riots in Paris and anti-Vietnam War protests in the United States (Cambre). To anti-war activists, he represented opposition to imperialism; to sympathetic student radicals, he represented communism and rebellion (Stanley 49); to Third World liberation

displayed the photo during the 1960s and 1970s generally understood who Che was and why he mattered because of the strong historical relevance of Che's original revolutionary causes.

Selling Dissent

The decisive change in the symbolism of Che occurred around the end of the Cold War. The photo had circulated widely as a political symbol in the 1960s and was reproduced freely by activists, publishers, and artists around the world because of Alberto Korda's decision not to enforce copyright restrictions on the photograph. Korda viewed the photo as belonging to the revolutionary cause rather than to himself. By the 1990s, however, the collapse



of the Soviet Union had stripped many communist symbols of their immediate political urgency in the West. Detached from the ideological conflicts that had originally given it meaning, Che's image became available for commercial reinterpretation.

The famous silkscreen portrait consequently entered mainstream consumer culture because of its easily replicable nature and its affinity to the pop art aesthetic. It appeared on mass-produced clothing, accessories, posters, and decorative products marketed by companies including Gap, Urban Outfitters, Belstaff, Vans, and Louis Vuitton (Allwood) to new generations of the average consumer with little knowledge and interest in Cuban history or socialist politics. Simultaneously, countless adaptations of Korda's photograph emerged. The image was stylized, recoloured, parodied, and incorporated into advertising campaigns and artistic parodies. This process fulfills conditions and of the "iconic photograph" and makes the icon of Che Guevara truly culturally significant.

This entrance of Che's image into consumer culture transformed Che into a "floating signifier" with no fixed meaning and interpretation (Lévi-Strauss 63). While displaying Che's photo generally implied support for anti-imperialism, socialism, or revolutionary politics in the 1960s, contemporary consumers often associate the image with youth culture, anti-authoritarian attitudes, individuality, or vintage aesthetics. Many who purchase Che merchandise have little knowledge of his role in the Cuban Revolution, his writings, or his significance in socialist ideologies. As the image became detached from its historical context, two major contradictions emerged that help explain why Che does not deserve the T-shirt.

The first contradiction is that the commercialization of his imagery exploits the rights of the social class he fought to protect. Che spent much of his life condemning capitalism, consumerism, and economic exploitation, but the products created from his image were manufactured by multinational corporations operating through global production networks that outsource production to exploitative low-wage labour in peripheral developing countries. The profits generated by his image flows instead to corporations participating in the global capitalist system Che rejected. Karl Marx's "commodity fetishism" explains the reasoning behind this transformation: commodities become detached from the social relations that produced them because consumers encounter products as isolated objects rather than as the result of particular forms of labour, exploitation, and historical circumstances.

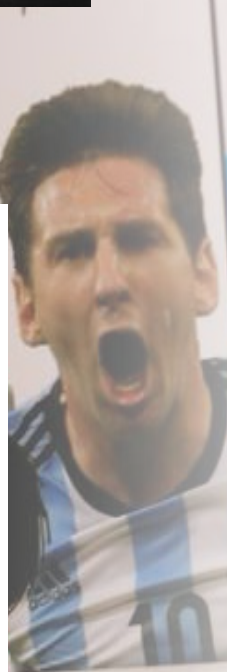
The other contradiction is political: the T-shirt allows consumers to purchase the appearance of rebellion without engaging with the political commitments that originally gave the symbol meaning. Cultural theorist Dick Hebdige argued that countercultural symbols of resistance are eventually repackaged as fashionable, marketable, and profitable commodities in mainstream consumer society, which effectively neutralizes political dissent. Similar processes can be observed in the commercialization of rock and roll, punk fashion, and peace symbols. One possible objection is that Che's T-shirts can still be used to symbolize genuine political resistance. For example, a hoodie with Che was worn at the funeral of the Argentine photojournalist José Luis Cabezas after he was brutally tortured and murdered while investigating corruption in 1997, which could be seen as a possible act to protest political violence and advocate press freedom. However, resistance is now only one of many possible meanings attached to Che's image. The real problem is that the meaning of the T-shirt Che no longer derives primarily from his ideology, but from the interpretations imposed by individual consumers. Therefore, the T-shirt preserves not his political legacy, but an aesthetic of rebellion.



Conclusion

As such, it is important to distinguish the significance of the photograph from the T-shirt. Che deserves the iconic photograph because it was produced from genuine historical circumstances and carries the rhetorical appeal of a man with the spirit to act upon his convictions regardless of personal cost.

Having the image printed on a T-shirt, however, detaches the ideological and historical context from the photograph and transforms Che's revolutionary message into a marketable aesthetic. In this sense, Che deserves the photograph that made him an icon, but not the T-shirt that made him a brand. Che's iconography—from the photograph to the silk-screen print and the T-shirt—is therefore not only the story of a revolutionary becoming globally recognized, but the demonstration of how modern consumer capitalism neutralizes and sells symbols of rebellion.



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