

Hasta la Victoria (Deportista) Siempre: Revolution, Art, and the Representation of Sport in Cuban Visual Culture

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Since 1959, Cuban artists have produced an extensive and distinguished body of poster art, while the international success of Cuban athletes has likewise been lauded. Although poster production is primarily focused on themes related to domestic sovereignty and anti-imperial struggles, sport and health-related subjects also figure prominently in the larger Cuban visual tradition. By incorporating methodologies drawn from art history and visual studies, particularly using approaches illustrated in the writings of Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez and Guy Debord, this article highlights the manner that understanding the ‘visual turn in sport’ initiates historical ways of knowing that are different from other ways of understanding sport history. By analysing photographs of Fidel Castro and other *barbudos* (bearded revolutionaries) engaged in sport, as well as sport-themed posters, the author begins to uncover how art history and visual studies may aid in creatively understanding sport history and its role in larger political spheres.

Keywords: Cuba; Fidel Castro; photography; posters; art; baseball

Como ya era tiempo de justicia, cultura y deporte dejaron de ser exclusivos, privilegios de unos pocos, y ascendieron a las masas.

[‘Now in a period of justice, culture and sport stopped being exclusive, privileged by few, and spread to the masses’].¹

Since the 1959 institutionalisation of the revolution, Cuba has produced an extensive and distinguished body of poster art, while the international success of Cuban sports has likewise been lauded.² The crux of poster production focuses heavily on themes related to domestic sovereignty and internationalist struggles against imperialism. Sport and health-related material, as shown by Lincoln Cushing, also figure prominently in the larger corpus of the Cuban poster tradition.³ By incorporating approaches drawn primarily from art history and visual studies, as well as Cuban and sport history, this essay highlights the manner in which photographic and artistic representations of sport initiate multifaceted histories that can best be interpreted using approaches drawn from theorists including Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez, among others. Moreover, by analysing

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photographs of Fidel Castro and other *barbudos* (the bearded revolutionaries) actively engaged in sport, as well as sporting posters, we begin to thoroughly uncover the manner in which art historical and visual studies approaches may aid in the understanding of sport history and its role in the larger political sphere.

By interrogating sports posters and photographs, following recent scholarly trends initiated in works such as *Contesting Identities: Sports in American Film* by Aaron Baker and *Sport in the USSR: Physical Culture – Visual Culture* by Mike O'Mahony, this essay analyses the visual representation of Cuban sports to fully flesh out the tripartite relationship between sport, art and politics. Unlike popular *mythologies* of sport as formulaic propaganda, Cuban sport (and particularly visual representations of sport) serves as a complex site where the intricacies of the revolution were (and continue to be) played out.⁴ In many ways, Cuban sport becomes a dialectic site where competing ideas are engaged. Although specifically writing about Soviet sporting cultures, O'Mahony writes that 'Far from simply reflecting contemporary activities, representations of sport frequently addressed important and complex issues regarding not only the practice of sport itself, but also its wider significance for Soviet society'.⁵

In a similar manner, this investigation of Cuban visual culture becomes increasingly important for sport historians as it facilitates an explanation of the multifarious relationship between seemingly disparate historic, visual and discursive fields. By seeing sports photographs and posters as historically situated within the socialist-capitalist dialectic, we begin to dismantle the notion that visual representations of sport might be seen as purely primary documents to be used as archival 'evidence'. Instead, these images function as highly contested sites serving a variety of ideological and social functions. By (literally) seeing how these two bodies of images (photographs and posters) operate in relation to Cuban art and politics, we begin to understand how and why the history of sports ephemera is relevant to the documentation and historicisation of sport, while simultaneously linked to counter-hegemonic political and revolutionary aesthetic programmes.

With the seizure of power on 1 January 1959, socialist Cuba entered into the internationalist and anti-colonial project of creating Third World solidarity. More so than any other Third World state, Cuba was heavily committed to internationalist solidarity. As historian Vijay Prishad notes in *The Darker Nations*, 'The Third World was not a place. It was a project. During the seemingly interminable battles against colonialism, the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America dreamed of a new world. They longed for dignity above all else, but also the basic necessities of life (land, peace, and freedom)'.⁶ The Third World project, as Prishad clearly articulates, was the collective and continental reply of the colonised against systematic and continued colonial oppression. In fact, Che Guevara noted the 'continental character of the [Cuban] struggle'.⁷ As such, in January 1966, Cuba established OSPAAAL (Organisation in Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America) as an institution to express camaraderie with anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements around the world.

Founded following the Tricontinental Conference in Havana, OSPAAAL's agenda included funding and producing thousands of posters, distributed both in Cuba and abroad. These posters, along with those produced by other federal agencies evoked pop art aesthetics to visually challenge Cuban society through new signifying systems. The language of the Cuban poster, as historians and critics have noted, was unique in its incorporation of global 'bourgeois' aesthetics, a form that other socialist regimes denied. Susan Sontag notes that

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. . . [Instead] All that the revolution should do with bourgeois culture is democratize it, making it available to everyone and not just a socially privileged minority.⁸

Accordingly, both sport and art were to be democratised in socialist Cuba.

In February 1961, INDER (National Institute of Physical Education and Recreation) was established. With Decree 936, a moratorium was placed on 'capitalist sport' in favour of promoting amateur athletics through increased citizen participation. Since Havana had a strong baseball infrastructure established in the mid-nineteenth century, the revolution shifted focus from professional sport to one advocating healthy lifestyles and a lifelong commitment to participation.⁹ This restructuring was seen as a threat to North American minor league baseball's International League which, in 1960, relocated the Havana Sugar Kings to Jersey City, NJ. Instead of the staunch competition of professional sport, as Paula Pettavino and Philip Brenner document, the universal physical education practised in Cuba served to eliminate gender, class and racial divisions, while supporting (inter)national development.¹⁰ As such, the socialist regime evoked the slogan *el deportes es salud* (sports is health) linking sport to both the health of the Cuban people, as well as the nation as a whole.

Los Barbudos: Mythologising the Revolution through Baseball Photographs

From the first Cuban League game played on the island in December 1878, baseball has been integral to the creation of an anti-colonial and revolutionary culture that resists outside domination and imperial control by linking sport to a revolutionary and sovereigntist movement. Peter C. Bjarkman notes that

If Fidel Castro has often used baseball in recent decades as a propaganda tool to advance the cause of national identity and promote his perceived advantages of a socialist society, it must be remembered that the sport's 19th-century roots were also bound up with a nationalistic cause of rebellion against the then-hated Spaniards.¹¹

While Castro, as a metonym for socialist Cuba, has been criticised for his use of sport as an 'ideological' tool, a century prior to the evocation of baseball as 'propaganda', sport already served as an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist tool against imperial Spain.

With the revolution's seizure of state power in 1959, the importance of sport to the revolution was quickly picked up in the international media. This historical legacy was tactically employed by the revolutionary regime. In fact, as documented in a 1958 Agence France-Presse (AFP) photograph of Che Guevara, posed in his batting stance while wearing military fatigues, baseball was so important that rebels took time out of their struggles in the Sierra Maestra to play the game. The importance of baseball to a revolutionary social agenda did not diminish with the success of the revolution, but actually increased and became a hallmark of Cuban socialist heterodoxy.

Just months after Castro and the *barbudos* marched successfully into Havana, the revolutionary government organised an exhibition game between Los Barbudos, as their uniforms were aptly embroidered, and a rival team consisting of the 'revolutionary military police'. Scheduled immediately prior to the International League match between the Havana Sugar Kings and the Rochester Red Wings on 24

July 1959, Castro pitched two innings for the Barbudos, while Camilo Cienfuegos was scheduled to start for the military police squad.¹² Images from this game circulated the globe through international journalist networks, such as AFP and *Life* magazine. The photographs function as complex visual artifacts that demand intimate analysis. By offering possible ‘readings’ of these images, we may prefigure ways that sport history may more thoroughly engage visuality in its pre-existing array of methodologies.

These photographs, particularly images such as Perfecto Romero’s representation of Castro and Cienfuegos smiling and walking in their Barbudos uniforms, presented a particular playful and masculine image of the revolution. These photographs in their timely articulation enabled the establishment of a *mythology* that presents Castro as an ex-baseball player once scouted by the Washington Senators. While this folkloric myth is dispelled in Roberto González Echeverría’s *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball*, as well as Peter C. Bjarkman’s *A History of Cuban Baseball, 1864-2006*, it nonetheless works its mythology on countless histories of Cuba, including Cuban sport history.¹³ While I do not intend to dispel this Barthesian mythology, it is interesting nonetheless to see the manner in which a series of photographs, taken in Havana’s Cerro Stadium, serves both to legitimise the revolution, as well as mythologise Castro, the Barbudos and baseball in general.

These journalistic images of revolutionary baseball helped bolster a certain sporting and masculine mythology of Castro and the socialist state. One example, a posed photograph of Castro pitching (or at least pretending to pitch), serves to highlight the compound visual readings which photographs necessitate. In this particular image, Castro is represented wearing his Barbudos uniform, a watch and identifying spectacles, as he rears back to throw the ball. However, Castro’s unorthodox ‘pitching’ style is highlighted in the image, which depicts Castro with his glove turned outward to reveal his grip on the baseball both to the viewer of the photograph, as well as to any potential batter. While Bjarkman calls this style ‘unprofessional’, I wonder whether, instead of simply being representational of Castro’s actual pitching style, this highly posed photograph may actually reveal the heterodoxy of both Castro’s sporting practice and his larger political persona. Although both perspectives are informed readings, only the latter commences to interrogate the possible visual (and political) language of the image, even if perhaps improperly.

While informed, and creative, readings of photographs cannot be substantiated in the same way that archival ‘evidence’ may be verified, various ‘ways of seeing’, to paraphrase art historian John Berger, nevertheless aid in establishing nuanced histories.¹⁴ In *Image-Music-Text*, Roland Barthes argues that ‘whatever the origin and the destination of the message, the photograph is not simply a product or a channel but also an object endowed with a structural autonomy’.¹⁵ Barthes’s timely semiotic analysis ideally begins to establish a framework for how photographs could be interpreted at the time of their initial and now historical circulation. Although this type of theoretical explication has not been thoroughly incorporated into sport history, texts such as Murray G. Phillips and Alun Munslow’s *Deconstructing Sport: A Postmodern Analysis* begin to develop the theoretical and critical language needed to discuss the multiple ways sport history may be written.¹⁶

The date of the Cuban revolution and its relationship to an expanding global saturation of photographic images corresponded directly to writings on the photographic image as a mediated and therefore ideological form. Influenced by

earlier Marxist writings such as Walter Benjamin's *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Roland Barthes published *Mythologies* in 1957, only two years before the images of the Barbudos playing baseball circulated.¹⁷ His ideas were later expanded in *Image-Music-Text* in which he directly engaged with the way photographs could (and should) be read. For Barthes,

Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. . . . The photograph professing to be a mechanical analogue of reality, its first-order message in some sort completely fills its substance and leaves no place for the development of a second-order meaning.¹⁸

In this way, Barthes acknowledges the seemingly overt analogue relationship between a photograph and its respective 'reality'. This first-order meaning serves to mystify any capacity for second-order interpretation of the image. Of course, Barthes develops this line of critical thinking merely to demonstrate the 'dialectical' relationship between denotation and connotation that the photograph specifically evokes. The contemporaneous nature of Barthes's writing and the journalistic photographs of revolutionary Cuban leaders playing baseball serve well in establishing a historically-situated reading of these images.

In addition to Barthes, other intellectuals offer insights into how we may appropriately 'read' photographs, not as evidence but as highly contested artefacts embedded in historically-situated visual systems. Sontag, who has written both on photographic theory (*On Photography*) as well as on Cuban posters ('Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity'), expands Barthes's intellectual initiative and further elucidates how photographs can be historically deciphered. Sontag writes that 'Photography has powers that no other image-system has ever enjoyed because, unlike the earlier ones, it is *not* dependent on an image maker'.¹⁹ While critical of perceived authorial and pictorial autonomy, Sontag acknowledges, as did Barthes before her, that photographs establish a two-tiered system of meaning (known to semiologists as denotation and connotation). While visual studies approaches evoke this methodology, many historians, particularly sport historians, have inadequately addressed the analogue relationship between the photograph and its representation, not fully enquiring about an image's connotation or second-level meaning.

The reciprocity, one where the photograph appears to operate within a first-order truth, must be called into question when interpreting sport history. Writing in 1931, Bertolt Brecht noted that

The tremendous development of photojournalism has contributed practically nothing to the revelation of the truth about the conditions of the world. On the contrary, photography, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, has become a terrible weapon against the truth. The vast amount of pictured material that is being disgorged daily by the press and that seems to have the character of truth serves in reality only to obscure the facts. The camera is just as capable of lying as the typewriter.²⁰

In turn, as this special issue of *International Journal of the History of Sport* demonstrates, sport historians must acknowledge the peculiar situatedness of photography, as well as the constructed nature of media objectivity.

How, then, do we read and historicise the visual manner in which sport is presented both to an international and domestic audience, through photojournalistic images of revolutionary Cuban leaders engaged in sport? The Getty Archives reveal

that this photographic genre of revolutionary leaders playing sport was primarily produced in the first two years after the revolution, with additional photographs being published through the mid-1960s. As images, these photographs contain both denotative and connotative information, and historians have generally focused upon uncovering the former. Deciphering the latter, the second-level or connotative meaning, is the intervention that this special issue offers. In terms of the Cuban revolution, photographs of revolutionary leaders engaging in sport served multiple purposes: social, cultural, pedagogical and political. On the one hand, these significant images helped humanise and legitimise the heterodox Marxist practices of the new government. On the other, they established a new notion of citizen participation in sport, inverting how both citizenship and professional sport generally operate under capitalist auspices. In the United States, for instance, capitalist leaders are commonly photographed throwing the first pitch at a baseball game or as spectators in the grandstand. Conversely, the photographs of the Barbudos serve to highlight the reciprocity between citizen participation, government leadership and socialist reorganisation. This, of course, contrasts with the practice of United States baseball. In this way, the photographs served to mythologise the revolution and its hopeful creation of a new humanity through sport. Without the unique status of the visual image, revolutionary mythologies would have remained incomplete.

However, once the revolution was fully institutionalised following the Batalla de Girón (Bay of Pigs) in 1961, photographs of Cuban leaders playing sport appear less and less frequently, although the spectre of these photographs nonetheless remained. By the 1970s, Cuban media campaigns had been turned inward, less interested in media 'spectacle', commencing the rise of the poster as a uniquely Cuban visual form. Through the alignment of amateur sport and non-commodifiable art, the Cuban state continued to reorganise civil society in anti-capitalist ways that challenged both United States and Soviet hegemonies.

Nuestro Enemigo es Imperialismo: The Heterodoxy of Cuban Posters

Beginning in the 1960s, posters were at the forefront of re-imagining Cuban visuality. Much in the way that sport and its visual representation served an ideological role in creating a new and socially equitable Cuban society, art was also reconceptualised in a way that disavowed both market economics and socialist realism. The experimentation of post-1959 Cuban art, contrasting the orthodoxy of Soviet visuality, allowed for the production of a multiplicity of visual styles to emerge.

Cuban artists, especially those producing serigraphs or silk-screens, did not sell their works nor use them as advertising. Instead, Cuban posters announced the screening of domestic and foreign films, advocated solidarity with the Third World, promoted national pedagogies and discussed community health – each serving a unique function outside capitalist markets. More so than other countries, Cuban artists constructed a caring and intimate internationalism which was at the core of Cuba's socialist project. Sontag writes that 'The promotion of internationalist consciousness plays almost as large a role in Cuba as the promotion of nationalist consciousness in most other left-revolutionary societies. . . . Contrary to what older artists in Cuba often allege, it is internationalism – not nationalism – in art which best serves the revolution's cause.'²¹

As Ernesto Cardenal acknowledged, Cuba found its artistic voice, not in the limited vocabulary of the Soviet bloc but in a cosmopolitan and indigenous visual language. Cardenal further recognised that Castro discouraged the monopolising of art by a singular style or visual mode, but understood the complexities of using multiple aesthetic styles.²² This was acutely manifest in Castro's articulation that 'Our enemies are capitalism and imperialism, not abstract painters'.²³

Under the auspices of numerous government agencies, including OSPAAAL, INDER, ICAIC (Cuban Film Institute), COR (Commission of Revolutionary Orientation), OCLAE (Latin American and Caribbean Students' Association), and Editora Política, posters served important ideological and visual functions. By the mid-1960s, intensifying international recognition was granted to the burgeoning poster culture of Cuba. In 1964, Antonio Fernández Reboiro's poster for the Japanese film *Hara Kiri* was recognised abroad for its avant-garde design.²⁴ Two years later, the *Primera Muestra de la Cultura Cubana* (First Show of Cuban Culture) was hung at the Pabellón Cuba in Havana. In 1968, the Pabellón served as host for a major exhibition, *Exposición del Tercer Mundo*, documenting the artistic and design practices of the Third World project.²⁵ By institutionalising an internationalist creative culture, Cuban society radically changed the face of 'socialist realism' and the history of modern art.

In this way, a cadre of artists made up the core of those producing posters for the various institutions, some as staff designers and others as freelance illustrators. Artists such as Eduardo Muñoz Bachs (1937–2001), Estela Díaz (dates unknown), Raúl Martínez (1927–95), René Mederos (1933–96), Antonio Pérez (Ñiko, b. 1941), René Portocarrero (1912–85), Alfredo Rostgaard (1943–2004) and Elena Serrano (dates unknown), to name only a few, rose to cultural (if not economic) prominence.²⁶ Cuba's aesthetic programme and 'national' art was one that drew heavily from contemporary visual expressions. As Raúl Martínez told Shifra Goldman, 'abstract art was the only weapon with which we could frighten people ... our painting served as a means to raise consciousness'.²⁷ Much in the manner that the government instituted 'literary brigades' using Freirian *conscientización*, posters raised consciousness and literacy levels through visual communication.

Within the arts, the continental and global solidarity that developed through these posters, connected to an unconventional visual language, was one of the most crucial and important aspects of Cuban artistic production. As has been pointed out:

By allowing art to evolve at its own pace within a new society, Cuban leadership hoped to have the contradictions go away on their own. The contradictions did not go away, but the restraint of the government on aesthetic issues allowed for a healthy and non-intimidating presence of these issues for all the artists.²⁸

Art critic Adelaida de Juan likewise notes that 'Cultural institutions were the first to search for a new visual and conceptual image'.²⁹ Since the revolution sought a rupture with the past, including an athletic shift towards amateur sport, the creation of new ways of seeing, and associated modes of visual representation, was crucial.

Unlike Cuba's economic system, which became intimately linked to Soviet-style modalities, artistic and cultural practices emerged unmoored to any specific visual style. In fact, Nicaraguan priest and Sandinista minister of culture Ernesto Cardenal recognised that 'In Cuba, as contrasted with Russia, there is no attempt made to create an art that can be understood by the people, the attempt is to educate the

people to the point where they can understand art. I was told that this has been the official policy of the revolution.’³⁰ Instead of creating easily accessible artworks, visually reducing them to naturalist illustrations, the new visual practice was instead intended to improve visual literacy.

This heterodox usage of the visual arts found advocates within the *barbudos*. Guevara held the conviction that ‘socialist realist art was the corpse of the 19th century bourgeois painting’.³¹ For both Castro and Guevara, their multifaceted artistic beliefs ran counter to those posited by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Art historian David Kunzle writes that

Soviet art officialdom and Premier Khrushchev were engaged in more-or-less public disputes with dissidents pursuing abstract or “nihilist” art. Khrushchev’s now famous outbursts against abstract art cannot have failed to penetrate Cuba in some form at the time Cuba was drawing economically closer to the Soviet Union.³²

Yet even with the growing economic necessity during the 1960s to be drawn into Soviet-style economic relations, Cuba refused to be contained by the stringent and authoritative style of socialist realism. Instead, the visual heterodoxy encouraged by Castro and Cuban cultural institutions was acutely apparent within the multi-layered visual language of Cuban serigraphs.

Early posters, however, were disparaged by Cuban critics for being ‘a grotesque and schematic simplification of the worker and his struggle against imperialism’.³³ Impressively, the crass celebratory nature of these early posters matured into a complex and nuanced signifying visual language, finding its ‘true socialist realism in Pop Art’, as Cardenal revealed.³⁴

Beginning in the 1960s and extending into the 1980s, state-funded institutions produced thousands of serigraphs as a way to publicise particular issues and events.³⁵ The function of these posters contrasted greatly with their capitalist counterparts. As ‘an early manifestation of commodity production within industrial capitalism’, as David Craven writes, capitalist-oriented posters have historically operated with the intention of selling products.³⁶ Instead, post-1959 Cuban posters have little or nothing to actually sell and therefore perform more ambitious pedagogical and ideological functions, as opposed to their inherent commercial nature under capitalism. Craven further writes that ‘the Cuban poster is not based on the ideological pretense that its images are “non ideological”. Instead, it overtly contests the ideology of mere personal gain by *not* presenting ideas and images as if they were outside a system of values, mediated by ideology at various levels.’³⁷ The formal and functional differences within these dialectic political economies (capitalism-socialism), and the cultural practices within them, are crucial to properly understand and contextualise these noteworthy visual artefacts, both from the vantage point of their production, as well as their reception.

A poster not intent on selling commodities to its audience has a unique relationship to sport, particularly the amateur sport that has predominated in revolutionary Cuba. As archivist Lincoln Cushing maintains in his superbly illustrated book *Revolución!: Cuban Poster Art*, ‘posters advertise sporting events, rather than individual teams, and encourage whole communities to participate in sports for the simple reason that it is good for them’.³⁸ Just as Castro believed that all Cubans should be athletes, these posters supported quotidian engagement with athletics. Castro himself stated that one ‘could not conceive of a young revolutionary who would not also be a sportsman’.³⁹

This representative Cuban practice is exemplified in Eduardo Murin Portillé's 1972 serigraph '*Practicar deportes es cultivar la salud*' ('To Practise Sports is to Grow Healthy' – Figure 1). In this print, sport is not reduced to mindless competition, but rather focuses on the localised complexities of practising sport as a way of developing a healthy society. In posters such as this, Cuban artists illuminate the economic and socio-political realities of the island, instead of purely mystifying class relations, as commonly occurs under capitalist representations of sport. Just as capitalist modes of production attempt to diminish the ideological function of the visual arts, so too did anti-Communist rhetoric attempt to highlight the non-ideological function of sports, a fallacy that many sport historians recognise. In this manner, both sport and art are frequently presented as ideologically neutral. In a 1963 pamphlet *Sports without Freedom is No Sport at All*, the Unión Deportiva de Cuba Libre, an anti-Communist group of Cuban exiles, asserts that

Communist Cuba's sports delegations do not attend these [international sporting] events with a sporting spirit. They are political instruments that take advantage of such opportunities to infiltrate into the Youth of this Hemisphere, and of the rest of the Free World, the Communist philosophy which oppresses all human rights. They try to change the pure and clean activity of sport into a farce to serve the political instruments of the Soviet Union.⁴⁰

This publication serves to clarify the anti-Communist rhetoric surrounding both sport and art after the Revolution and is particularly salient in reconstructing how sport was seen by Cuban exiles in the US.

Practicar Deportes es Cultivar la Salud: Cuban Posters and Amateur Sport

It appears, at least from extant archival documentation, that the bulk of sports-related posters were printed in the early 1970s. *Practicar deportes es cultivar la salud*, published by the Editora Política for DOR and briefly discussed earlier, is an interesting point of departure. This bi-chromatic, offset lithograph poster – based on an original serigraph – addresses amateur sport on the island and sport's greater importance to the development of a healthy society. While the United States and United Kingdom tend to validate youth sports, there nonetheless remains a focus in the West on using sport not as a form of healthy (and socialist) cooperation, but as a means toward professionalisation. In *Practicar deportes es cultivar la salud*, the composition freely plays with both positive and negative space by using flat tonal ranges, as was common among the larger body of Cuban posters. It is activated by three figures (a batter, catcher and umpire), individually represented by areas of white space highlighted against a warm yellow ground. Each figure is firmly positioned in the middle-ground of the print. A large organic and amorphous field of orange juts through the yellow landscape to the right of the figures, and pulls the composition together. The figure, placed within the extreme foreground, decisively locates the poster's audience as an actual spectator of the represented ballgame.

While socialist realism attempted to mimic the analogue relationship of photography, the abstract nature of Cuban posters facilitates complex readings. In the same way that photographs of the Barbudos baseball team have multiple significations, so too do these posters. Initially, these posters were intended to shape public opinion and practice at the grass roots level. Inversely, through their sensuous compositions and skilled handling of the media, artists redirect poster audiences to



Figure 1. Eduardo Murín Potrille, *Practicar Deportes es Cultivar la Salud* ('To Practise Sports is to Grow Healthy'), 1973. Offset lithograph.
Source: Image provided by Lincoln Cushing/Docs Populi, scanned from slides provided by Editora Política, Havana, Cuba. All rights reserved by original artist.

an array of possible significations. These multivalent readings, just as they did during the poster's initial circulation in 1972, work to historicise the image and make sense of its visual historicity.

While '*Practicar deportes es cultivar la salud*' is an image with primarily pedagogical purposes, José Lamas' serigraph '*XI Serie nacional de beisbol aficionado*' ('11th National Amateur Baseball Series') performs the distinct function of promoting a January 1972 athletic event. Instead of focusing on the specificity of the teams or players participating in this national series, Lamas evokes an elongated umpire to dissect the composition into four unequal sections. Using a sans serif font, without capitalisation, the text becomes negative space in the flat, opaque, olive-green background, seemingly signifying the grass playing field.

Using the umpire to represent a baseball tournament is an interesting decision on the artist's behalf. With his arms spread wide, signalling 'safe', the umpire establishes a safe space where the ball player is literally safe on base. Metaphorically, the image perhaps intimates how the revolution and its supporters could be safe from the omnipresent threats of United States imperialism or outside danger. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the umpire's identity, also seen in many of the other sporting posters, operates in strict contrast to the analogue relationship seen in the photographs of revolutionary leaders, whose likenesses cannot be denied.

Since photographs have a structural relationship with the 'reality' they represent, the image of the Barbudos (or of anyone else for that matter) will ultimately establish a direct connection back to the individual they depict. A photograph of Castro pitching will almost certainly signify Castro. Conversely, the anonymity of these posters' figures, with their absence of facial features, allows both the artist and the audience interpretive latitude when 'reading' them. This, of course, allows for more open-ended analyses among their original audiences, not to mention for historians. For instance, while seeing oneself represented in a photograph as Castro may be improbable, identifying oneself as the anonymous umpire is a legitimate response to these posters. In this regard, posters, unlike photographs, allow for more historical mobility and critical analysis.

Since baseball is central to Cuban national identity, a point that will be clarified in the conclusion, it is not surprising that some of the most visually appealing sport ephemera are directed towards baseball. Unlike either the work of Portillé or Lamas, Jesús Forjans's 1970 offset lithograph '*XI Juegos Centroamericanos y del Caribe*' ('11th Central American and Caribbean Games') was created for an international audience to announce an event that occurred outside the island. The February 1970 Central American and Caribbean Games were held in Panama, with Cuba successfully competing against neighbouring nations. According to a 1972 issue of *Ediciones Deportivas*, a Havana-based sports publication, the 1970 games proved that the success 'demonstrated by the Cuban athletes, their strength, went far beyond all calculations previously made by those who would later be rivals in competitions'.⁴¹

Although the non-professionalisation of Cuban sports is one of the greatest characteristics of the island's athletics, sport has nonetheless frequently been used by state bureaucrats to represent the achievements of the government. The potential of getting lost in the successes of high-performing Cuban athletes led Castro to warn that 'It is important that we not be mistaken, that in the search for champions we do not neglect the practice of sports. Everyone should practise sports, not only those in primary schools but also adults and the elderly'.⁴² From the initial photographs of 1959 through the posters of the 1970s, as well as in images of Castro 'coaching' the

national team in their 1999 exhibition match against the Baltimore Orioles, there has been a tension between how sport is practised competitively and how it is represented pictorially.

While Barthes and Sontag acknowledge that photographs are directly tied to the events they represent, posters do not have this same analogue affiliation and more readily reflect second-level signification. In this way, serigraphs and lithographs allowed their creators (and audiences) to develop nuanced readings partially autonomous from the referents that the posters depict. In his work on Marxist aesthetics, Mexico-based Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez maintained that capitalism establishes a false binary between fine art and popular art.⁴³ For Sánchez Vásquez, artists can avoid this dilemma

by struggling to make art that is neither elite and for the initiated, nor mass art which obeys the economic and ideological demands of capitalism and is interested only in mass consumption. An art suitable for a public capable of a human or aesthetic appropriation of its products must address itself neither to a privileged nor an alienated public, but to the people, because it would be the living language of man.⁴⁴

The dialectic nature of Cuban visual art is likewise addressed both in Cuban sport and its representation. This sporting tension between athletic competition and sport as cooperation is visually portrayed in a selection of posters from the early 1970s. Much like the regime's early heterodox socialist policies in general, this cooperative-competitive tension is left unresolved, ultimately allowing the Cuban citizenry to construct meaning.

We see this dialectic tension in Estela Díaz's '*Juegos Juveniles de la Amistad*' ('Youth Friendship Games', 1971 – Figure 2) and '*Giraldo Córdova Cardín Torneo Boxeo*' ('Giraldo Córdova Cardín Boxing Tournament', 1972) both which use face-to-face confrontation as the focal point. Focusing on confrontation and human conflict, these posters aestheticise the practical tension between participation and competition. By calling the former event Youth Friendship Games, as many amateur sports contests were, this contest is recontextualised as a site of 'friendly competition'. Much in the way that Sánchez Vásquez dismantles the capitalist division between fine art and popular art; the competition-cooperation dilemma was also contested under the Cuban system.

Visually, the point of conflict in each image is confronted. In 'Boxing Tournament', Díaz portrays the attacking boxer as throwing a missing punch at the head of the defensive figure. Equally, 'Friendship Games' evokes wrestling to symbolise camaraderie, a seemingly contradictory manoeuvre that contests normative notions of combat sports. The playful use of language is likewise enticing, as *lucha libre* (literally, 'free struggle') is the Spanish translation for wrestling. The linguistic and pictorial double signification of wrestling recalls continued 'struggles' against United States hegemony by using two grappling figures as the poster's focal point. Moreover, the serigraph's non-naturalistic flesh-tones are a common aesthetic device in Cuban posters. By representing the athletes as outside Black-White racialised structures, Díaz plays with notions of race in the Cuban struggle to create a new humanity, even if race could never be fully escaped in Cuban daily life. Since racial hierarchies continued to persist in socialist Cuba, the artist toys with these identities by refiguring a non-racialised Cuban society.

While these images are examples of the way that artists have represented sporting competitions, there are also multiple film posters for sports festivals and films that



Figure 2. Estela Díaz, *Juegos Juveniles de la Amistad* ('Youth Friendship Games'), 1971. Serigraph.

Source: Image provided by Lincoln Cushing/Docs Populi, scanned from slides provided by Editora Política, Havana, Cuba. All rights reserved by original artist.

deal with sport as their themes. These include: Bachs's *'El Deporte Nacional'* (1973), publicising an animated film, and *'Maravilla con Trenzas Largas'* ('Long-haired Wonder' [Chudo S Kosichkami], 1977), announcing the Cuban release of a Soviet film on gymnastics; as well as Antonio Reboiro's *'El Deporte en el Cine'* (1975) for a sport film festival. These posters each transcend the insular nature of capitalist sport by highlighting sport's universal capacity to penetrate all facets of Cuban society. As sport and art were democratised after 1959, the high-low binary between various cultural sectors was abandoned, just as Sánchez Vásquez proposed in his Marxist critique of aesthetics.

More recently, sport was prominently featured alongside culture in a series of eight didactic posters created in 1989 by René Mederos. The posters illustrate important emancipatory moments in Cuban history, beginning with José Martí and ending with literacy and medical improvements on the island. In the sixth poster, Mederos illustrates that 'Now in a period of justice, culture and sport stopped being exclusive, privileged by few, and spread to the masses'. By placing sport in the same non-elite category as post-revolutionary culture, Mederos displays the democratised character that both have performed in Cuba. In this series, sport and culture fit snugly into the way that the revolution has been situated. By moving away from sport as a privilege, this series places sport and culture as human rights that must be accessible to all Cubans, not only elites. Produced in 1989, however, the reductive composition and naturalistic visual language of the poster is demonstrative of the fate of Cuba's once transgressive visual culture. While the previously produced posters successfully played with their materiality, this poster appears visually reductive in its use of text and image.

The publication of this poster in 1989 coincides directly with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, whose funds helped support Cuba's complex artistic and sporting infrastructure. With the breakdown of the state-socialist project in the late 1980s and 1990s, the heterodoxy of Cuban visual art entered into a phase of restructuring. This 'Special Period', as the post-Soviet era was known in Cuba, greatly affected the vibrancy of both sport and art in profound ways, as the island struggled to maintain a just and sustainable economic future. Ariana Hernández-Requant states that 'As Cuba moved to salvage its economy from the deep crisis caused by the loss of its socialist trading partners, much of the state infrastructure of cultural production and distribution was turned into a network of for-profit semiautonomous enterprises'.⁴⁵ The transition towards capitalist and semi-capitalist endeavours has intensely affected the representation of sport, both in terms of aesthetic devices, as well as the artistic modalities themselves. With the reintroduction of capitalist models, artistic tendencies have shifted towards capitalist models of market-based objects and spectacle.

Conclusion

In *La Société du Spectacle*, French Situationist Guy Debord theorised the work of Marx as understood within the closed constraints of mid twentieth-century commodity fetishism and its affiliation with expanding mass media.⁴⁶ When writing in 1970, Sontag found that spectacle was not of interest to contemporary artists in Cuba. Instead, she determined that 'Spectacle, the favorite public art form of most revolutionary societies, whether to the right or the left, is implicitly understood by

Cubans as repressive'.⁴⁷ While once viewed as 'repressive,' with the re-emergence of capitalism in Cuba, spectacle returned as a viable artistic modality.

By the late-1980s, the aesthetic vitality of Cuban art, particularly posters, began to diminish and the vibrancy of Cuban artistic practices became somewhat torpid, much like the island's athletic and economic infrastructure. The indeterminacy of the 1960s and 1970s transformed into a 'trajectory of rumors', as Havana-based critic Eugenio Valdés Figueroa refers to recent Cuban art.⁴⁸ As a case in point, the structural limitations of both art and sport came to a head with an exhibition at the Castillo de la Real Fuerza, also in 1989. After five days, the exhibition was censored and closed, characterising this troubling transition from an open artistic playing field to an ever-contracting political and economic atmosphere. In an ironic response to the show's forced closure, artists, students and intellectuals gathered for a game of baseball in Echeverría Stadium, further linking art and sport in a discursive network of interconnected practices.

Since government certification was required to curate an art exhibition, but not to organise a game of baseball, artists openly evoked sport as a codified critique against impending state control of the arts. Calling the irreverent performance piece 'Cuban Art is Dedicated to Baseball', the event was similarly forced to close prematurely, shepherding in a period of crisis in Cuban art-making. Artists began returning to more 'traditional' fine arts and object-based practices, a move linked to both the continued pressure exerted on the state by the United States trade embargo, as well as a response to the opening-up of the Cuban art market to international collecting. The heterodox tradition of Cuban posters was transformed into a shell of its former self, with many artists surviving by selling their work to foreign collectors. Part ideological, part economic, part necessity, artists in the late-1980s and 1990s began making works to sell in the capitalist market, moving away from the anti-capitalist posters of the 1960s and 1970s.

It seems fitting that, in a move against artistic censorship by the state, artists would turn towards sport as the mode of institutional critique. In an era of growing corporate sponsorship of sports, 'Cuban Art is Dedicated to Baseball' elucidates the growing disparity that now exists between amateur sport in the Third World and professional sport under globalised capital. Although these artists employed *sport as art*, acting in many ways as a proxy for art itself, its evocation further indicates the importance of sport to communicate the complexities of Cuban society likewise embedded in art. By concentrating on the complex networks of art, sport and politics in Cuba, I believe we begin to see an interesting example of the possibilities and failures of their integration within the centralised state. With the rise of serigraph posters, a popular and indigenous artistic form arose in Cuba. With the censure of 'Cuban Art is Dedicated to Baseball', the omnipresent relationship between sport and art in Cuba, one where sport serves as metonym for larger social and political issues in a tightened political sphere, was concretised.

Since at least the 1959 photographs of the Barbudos, sport and its representation has offered contested visions of Cuban history and ways that we may creatively interpret it. By historically analysing these photographs alongside sports-themed posters, the intricacies of art, sport and politics are expanded. Further, by highlighting this reciprocity with the political realm, 'Cuban Art is Dedicated to Baseball' contrasts with the counter-revolutionary propaganda published by the Unión Deportiva de Cuba Libre in 1963 and offers even more possibilities for future research. While not offering any definitive directions on using visual studies to better

interpret sport, these three brief vignettes serve as theoretical models as to how visual culture may be better incorporated into a hermeneutically rich sport history that is both interpretive and theoretical, while simultaneously operating across disciplinary fields.

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Notes

1. René Mederos, *Editora Política* Poster (1989).
2. During the 1960s and 1970s, 'la edad de oro' as art critic Gerardo Mosquera calls the period, the production of posters reached visual and numeric heights. To date, with the help of archivist and historian Lincoln Cushing, I have located more than 20 posters directly endorsing sporting events or engaging health-related themes. It is important to note that Lincoln Cushing, who has worked directly with Cuban cultural institutions to document poster history, has found that many of the agencies have no institutional means of archiving the posters. As more research is conducted, more posters will come to light.
3. Cushing, *Revolución!*
4. O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*.
5. *Ibid.*, 9.
6. Prishad, *The Darker Nations*, xv.
7. Guevara, *Che Speaks*, 85.
8. Sontag, 'Posters', xvii.
9. Bjarkman, *A History of Cuban Baseball*.
10. Pettavino and Brenner, 'The Dual Role of Sports', 380.
11. Bjarkman, *A History of Cuban Baseball*, 5.
12. See Bunck, *Fidel Castro and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture*.
13. González Echeverría, *The Pride of Havana*; and Bjarkman, *A History of Cuban Baseball*.
14. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.
15. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 15.
16. Phillips and Munslow, *Deconstructing Sport*.
17. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*.
18. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 17.
19. Sontag, 'The Image-World', 352.
20. Statement made by Bertolt Brecht in a 1931 issue of *A-I-Z* magazine, cited in Kahn, *John Heartfield: Art and Mass Media*, 64.
21. Sontag, 'Posters,' xiii.
22. Cardenal, *In Cuba*, 189.
23. *Time Magazine*, 29 March 1963.
24. de Juan, 'Three Essays on Design', 46.
25. Menéndez, 'Cuba: Diseño Gráfico'.
26. Unfortunately, even though the revolution made an effort to challenge the prescribed gender relations in Cuban society, it must be noted that of all catalogued posters, only between 7% and 15% were produced by women. Even with this absence, many international artists, including both men and women, travelled to Cuba to labour alongside their Cuban allies.
27. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas*, 46–7.
28. Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, 100.
29. de Juan, 'Three Essays on Design', 45.
30. Cardenal, *In Cuba*, 189.
31. Kunzle, 'Public Graphics in Cuba', 90.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Revolución*, 6 and 13 May 1963, cited in Kunzle, 'Public Graphics in Cuba', 91.

34. Cardenal, *In Cuba*, 189.
35. Archivist Lincoln Cushing estimates that there were somewhere between 6,000 to 8,000, many of which no longer exist or have any documentation of their creation.
36. Craven, 'The Visual Arts since the Cuban Revolution', 81–2.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Cushing, *Revolución!*, 49
39. Fidel Castro cited in Bunck, *Fidel Castro*, 202.
40. Unión Deportista de Cuba Libre, *Sports without Freedom is No Sport at All*.
41. Ulloa, 'XI Juegos Centroamericanos y del Caribe'. Ulloa cites the 1972 issue of *Ediciones Deportivas* (my translation).
42. Fidel Castro speech at Mártires de Barbados. Cited in Pettavino and Pye, *Sport in Cuba*, 97–8.
43. In his writing, Sánchez Vásquez calls these 'minority art' and 'mass art'.
44. Sánchez Vásquez, *Art and Society*, 265.
45. Hernández-Regaunt, 'Copyrighting Che', 2.
46. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*.
47. Sontag, 'Posters', xix.
48. Valdés Figueroa, 'Trajectories of a Rumor'.

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