

Aesthetics Under Siege: Dirty Realism and Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*

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Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Cuba sank into the worst economic crisis of its modern history. During this period, which came to be officially known as the *Período Especial*, Cubans were indeed very hungry. In 1993, during the XV Havana International Film Festival, the Spanish film *Belle Époque* was screened. In Fernando Trueba's film, meals punctuate the progress of the plot, as Fernando, the young protagonist who has deserted the army after a failed Republican coup, successively falls in love with each of the four daughters in the house where he has taken refuge. Indeed, the food prepared by Fernando, who has been trained as a cook at the seminary, not only is exhibited, savored, and discussed, but also seduces, determines friendship, evokes memories, and even secures a wedding at the end. As my Cuban friends recalled, no sooner had Fernando's heavenly delicacies covered the big screen at La Rampa theater than the audience, only half mockingly, began shouting "Please, turn it off! This is torture!" Their proverbial good humor notwithstanding, Cubans, understandably, could hardly stomach the representation of food; food, that is, that they were unable to digest literally. The visceral response to the images of food in *Belle Époque*, however, does more than just illustrate the hardships endured by Cubans following the collapse of the Soviet block; it also comments on a historically conditioned type of aesthetic response. For one thing, it shows how the audience's acutely alert senses had clouded their perception of the film to the point where hunger was hindering aesthetic contemplation. The his-

torical conditions of the *Período Especial* complicated the audience's response to *Belle Époque*, making the film exhibitionist in unexpected ways, for hunger and aesthetic judgment are not quite possible at exactly the same time.

In the work of thinkers such as Kant and Pierre Bourdieu, the denial of necessity is the mark of "pure aesthetics." Taste, as Kant originally defined it in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is:

the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction *without any interest*. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*. (96, emphasis in the original)

According to Kant, two main categories differ from that of the beautiful. On the one hand, there is the agreeable, i.e. that "which pleases the senses in sensation" (91); on the other, there is the good, defined as "the object of the will (i.e., of a faculty of desire that is determined by reason)" (94). Both the agreeable and the good are, each in its own way, inseparable from the concept of interest—the interest of the senses, in the first case, and the interest of reason, in the second. For Kant, then, the total absence of interest is the main condition that makes pure aesthetic reflection possible (96).

In his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu departs from Kant's notion of pure aesthetic judgment in order to articulate how taste has become an instrument that helps establish and confirm a specific social cosmology. Before we examine this argument more closely, suffice it to say for now that the agreeable, defined by Bourdieu as the liking of an ob-

ject that is primarily perceived through bodily sensations, serves to abolish the distance required by the audience to experience pure aesthetic enjoyment, as in, for instance, the case of pornography. Bourdieu characterizes the lack of freedom to reflect upon a given work of art as a form of violence that the work exerts on the viewer. A work is violent because an object that appeals directly to the senses forces upon the viewer a real participation that is contrary to the "'distance' and 'disinterestedness' of pure taste" (487).

During the screening of the film *Belle Époque*, the sort of violence perpetrated upon the Havana audience was only partly inherent in the film, however "heavenly" the *bacalao* and exquisite the *paella* that appeared in the film. Mostly, however, it was the Cuban public's state of acute necessity that made the film "indecent" and "exhibitionist"—that is, immoral—in an unanticipated fashion. After all, disinterestedness and reflection are possible only in a life of ease.¹ In this particular moment of Cuban history, the food on the screen was necessarily perceived by Cubans as the presentation of real food, as if it were not mediated by its stylized representations. In addition, the audience's reaction further differed from the disinterested contemplation of pure aesthetics, which relies on the relatively strict separation of nature and culture, in that it privileged function over form, feeding over awe, or, in the words of Bourdieu, favored a "reduction of the things of art to the things of life" (4-6).

The Havana audience's reaction to *Belle Époque* can be summed up in four characteristic aspects: primarily sensorial appreciation, continuity between art and life, the privileging of function over form,

and ethical judgment. These modes are typical of a popular aesthetics, as opposed to a more refined concept of taste, which is based on the opposite; that is, pure aesthetic contemplation, separation of art and life, the privilege of form over function, and the neutralization of ethical judgment (Bourdieu 4-6). In the case of contemporary Cuba, it can be claimed that an invaluable merit of the revolution is precisely the fact that it made art production and consumption accessible to all. The impulse behind state-sponsored cultural production in Communist Cuba may have managed to blur the boundary between popular and pure aesthetics, a distinction that is, after all, constitutive of bourgeois culture.²

As Bourdieu has pointed out, taste is a complicated machinery that has the power to establish and confirm a whole social order:

Pure pleasure—ascetic, empty pleasure which implies the renunciation of pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure—is predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence, and the work of art a test of ethical superiority, an indisputable measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human man. What is at stake in aesthetic discourse, and in the attempted imposition of a definition of the genuinely human, is nothing less than the *monopoly of humanity*. [...] The opposition between the tastes of nature and the tastes of freedom introduces a relationship which is that of the body to the soul, between those who are ‘only natural’ and those whose capacity to dominate their own biological nature affirms their legitimate claim to dominate social nature. (491, emphasis in the original)

What is at stake in artistic judgment is, then, the confirmation or desecration of what is supposed to be “the true nature of the truly human man.” This somewhat ironic phrase eloquently expresses how a given social hierarchy is established depending on approximately where a given human being can be situated on a scale stretching between the purest forms of culture and the purest forms of nature, culture being the anti-nature, and *vice versa*. For Bourdieu, then, the appreciation of artistic value is “called upon to mark the distinction” between the human and the less human (491). In societies with a consolidated bourgeoisie, aesthetic value is applied to life practices in a way that is similar to the appreciation of artistic objects. Accordingly, the highest degree of refinement consists of “the ability to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g. in cooking, clothing or decoration” (5). Indeed, it is by focusing on the form of presentation of an object or practice in a way that denies its most basic function of feeding, covering and sheltering, in this case, that corporeality can be played down in order to confirm truly human status.

It is from the perspective of taste as social power that Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s artistic project can be said to intervene in the political order. By thematizing extreme necessity in what has been characterized as a crude and, often enough, immoral way, Gutiérrez’s aesthetics have elicited disgust and fascination in different groups of readers. As Bourdieu has shown, there is no aesthetics that is entirely pure since a notion of interest is always implicated. The case against pure aesthetics has been aggravated by a shift in values and interests among different social groups in the

context of receding socialist models on the ever-expanding horizon of globalized capital. In this essay I argue that, read against the backdrop of recent world politics, the aesthetics of Gutiérrez's *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* can be made to yield more than the sum of its social variables. By attending to the production and consumption of this text, we can map, through the apparently innocent judgment of aesthetic value, an ideological cosmology of a world in transition. For when the question is raised about how a given Cuban text could become the mark of "the truly human man," the answer must point to the very definition of utopia that configured and reconfigured the world's political imaginary for almost the entirety of the twentieth century.

Informed by the collapse of the Cuban revolution as a utopian system, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* is located at precisely all of the crossroads I have just delineated. Following its 1959 Revolution, Cuba located itself at the point of articulation between two aggressively competing world orders; today, it has stayed put, some might say miraculously, even twelve years after the end of the Cold War. Elsewhere, in the meantime, new world orders are taking shape in an increasingly globalized—that is, Americanized—world in which economic interests take precedence over ideologies in the name of a given lifestyle; a lifestyle that, ostensibly, only globalization can offer. This lifestyle affirms the notion of refinement in everyday practices that, only in their denial of corporeal need, and therefore of interest, become the mark of the truly human man. The monopoly of humanity that is at stake in what can be called the aesthetics of globalization, however, can only be sustained through the

zealous protection of those group interests that fuel consumerism. By contrast, Gutiérrez's aesthetics of "the belly and sex" present a world of vulgarity and sheer necessity in which the animality of man is foregrounded. Flauntingly devoid of refinement, Gutiérrez's world functions as the negative image of this new world beauty in unsettling ways. For it is precisely in violating all the assumptions of what constitute good habits, good taste, and good writing that Gutiérrez appeals to today's readers both inside and outside the island. In *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*, the tastes of the senses become the tastes of reflection, exposing in such inversion the interested nature of a series of contemporary moral, aesthetic and political positions.

Covering the first years of the *Período Especial*, the narrative of *Trilogía* begins in 1991. At this point, a year has elapsed since Fidel Castro first announced the waning of the economic and military protection afforded by the Soviet Union during a speech at the *Confederación de Trabajadores Cubanos* in January 1990. In his speech, Castro predicted that the island would sink into an unprecedented economic crisis (Fogel 327). Indeed, as foreseen by the *Comandante*, Cuba soon lost 75% of its trade partners and 100% of its Soviet funding following the dissolution of CAME (Consejo de Ayuda Mutua Económica). In addition, the Torricelli Act of 1992 and, later, the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 further consolidated the American embargo, which had by now become an absolute embargo. This situation led Castro to declare that the country would enter a war economy during times of peace—hence the official name *Período especial en tiempos de paz* (Moreno 2). Ironically, these years of hardship can be seen

as marking the first instance of true independence in Cuba since 1492, as the island became for the first time in its modern history a nation that was outside the sphere of influence of either Spain, the US, or the Soviet Union (Fogel 563).

In Gutiérrez's text, we find that Pedro Juan, the protagonist-narrator, has lost his job as a journalist for being too visceral in this hypersensitive moment.³ His wife has left him, and Cuba, to pursue the life of an artist in New York, while Pedro Juan has moved to a depressing *solar*,⁴ and barely makes a living by working successively as a garbage man, a male prostitute, a pimp of his own female partners, or an underdeveloped entrepreneur, doing *bisnesitos* here and there. At this moment, then, Pedro Juan is left with nothing except for his own body and, of course, with plenty of time in his hands. Pedro Juan seems to feel that he is immersed in an unprecedented horror and writes to ground himself. As a result, he writes *Trilogía*, which consists of three series of vignettes. The average vignette finds Pedro Juan waking up, trying to figure out what to eat, hearing his many neighbors fight or have sex, or both. He eventually finds either food or a sexual partner or rum or weed to smoke. The highest points, of course, are when he finds all four at the same time, but that does not happen very often. For the most part, however, the search for these various forms of gratification ends in encounters with a cast of neighbors that are dirty, hungry, and compelled to try to take advantage of one another.

The vignettes are not organized in a careful narrative structure and the prose is rather rough, unpolished. Overall, the narrative is mostly circular while neither nation nor characters suffer any dramatic change or are enlightened in any special

way.⁵ His style may be provisionally called "journalistic" since Gutiérrez was himself a journalist for twenty-seven years. In *Trilogía*, what matters is how writing works as a camera lens, as Pedro Juan zooms into his inner self, thoughts, sensations, and emotions, and zooms out to catch the world around him and document it. In this effort, the vignettes deal with several recurrent topics and preoccupations that inform the narrator's world: hunger, filth, sex, and the production of art. Before discussing the reception of the text, I will analyze these four recurrent aspects of *Trilogía* by reading some characteristic examples.

The theme of hunger is introduced early on in the text as the narrator attempts to situate his life within a historical context:

Ya Cuba estaba empezando la hambruna más seria de su historia. Creo que fue en el 91. Nadie se imaginaba toda el hambre y la crisis que vendría después. Yo tampoco. (33)

More than a historical marker, however, hunger becomes an obsession that helps define the identity of characters and, at the same time, seems to govern the relationships they establish with one another. Hunger, of course, is made dramatically visible by the loss of body mass. Pedro Juan himself seems to have lost many pounds, to the astonished eyes of former lovers, and most of the people he encounters are usually underweight. In general, women in the text usually need to gain a few kilos before they can even entertain the idea of becoming prostitutes. Dating a tourist for the price of a few meals is not uncommon behavior. In this context of desperate undernourishment, it is under-

standable that the success of those relatives and friends who left the island is measured in terms of how fat they have become.

Hunger has changed the urban landscape as well. In fact, the city itself seems to have moved in two opposite directions as a result of hunger during the *Período Especial*. On the one hand, the dramatic increase in tourism during the 1990s has made Havana more cosmopolitan and colorful, with foreign tourists and local *jineteros* (sex workers) flocking around one another in the newly restored public places. On the other hand, the more enclosed spaces in the city have become more rural. Pigs and chickens are raised in private bathrooms and common terraces throughout Havana with the approval of the state, a feeble attempt to assuage the hunger levels of the general population (Fogel 493). In *Trilogía*, the animals' excrement covers every common space in the *solar*, filling even the highest floors with rats and cockroaches. Hunger produces filth and indignity in equal parts as it encompasses all the inhabitants of Pedro Juan's Centro Habana neighborhood; indeed, squatting, prostitution, and suicide are seen more as humane solutions to hunger than as social problems *per se*.

More important, however, hunger gives way to cannibalism in *Trilogía*, thus defying the taboos of Western culture that mark a distinction between "civilization" and "barbarism," that is, between human and inhuman practices. There are two instances of cannibalism. The first occurs in a recurrent dream of Pedro Juan's, in which he cuts rosy steaks of his own flesh to cook for himself. He is happy because he doesn't bleed (139). The second is an actual form of cannibalism. A neighbor from Oriente

who has recently moved to the *solar* sells pork liver around the neighborhood. It is very cheap, he markets it very well, and everyone eats it. The police show up one day. As it turns out, however, the neighbor is working at the morgue, where he harvests human livers in order to sell them for a very decent profit. While the neighbors are, naturally, shocked, Pedro Juan cynically laughs since by now the human liver "[e]stá comido y cagado" (331).

Food being so scarce, the abundance of shit in the text seems rather surprising given that, at its most literal level, shit is the evidence of digestion. Indeed, shit appears all too often in the text, not just in defiance of natural laws, but in defiance of almost any standard. Shit is an unavoidable element of the city's landscape as it seeps out of collective bathrooms, runs into the streets, floats in the river, follows the *malecón*, dots the *azoteas*. It even leaps from the very *azotea* where Pedro Juan lives:

Fui para mi cuarto en la azotea. En Centro Habana. Es un buen lugar. Lo jodío allí son los vecinos y el baño colectivo. El baño más asqueroso del mundo, compartido por cincuenta vecinos, que se multiplican, porque la mayoría son de Oriente. [...] Y se las arreglan para vivir todos en un cuarto de cuatro por cuatro metros. No sé cómo. Pero lo hacen. Y en el baño la mierda llega al techo. En este baño cagan, mean y se bañan no menos de doscientas personas. Siempre hay cola. Aunque te estés cagando tienes que hacerla. Mucha gente, yo entre ellos, nunca hacemos cola: cago en un papel y lanzo el bulto de mierda a la azotea del edificio de al lado, que es más bajo. O a la calle. Da igual. (81)

Traditionally a place for privacy—i.e. a place that would provide secrecy, cleanliness and dignity to the act of defecation—the bathroom becomes instead a place where defecating becomes a collective enterprise and the unpleasant product invades everything and everyone alike. If the toilet is “a powerful symbol of technological and developmental superiority,” then what is the meaning of its failure in this case? (Esty 29).⁶ In *Trilogía*, the failure of the private bathroom in its attempt to become a public enterprise points to the encompassing reality, as can be seen in the state of the building where he lives, the neighborhood in which it is located, and, on a larger scale, of course, to the state of the nation as a whole. In fact, the “Boston-style” building, once luxurious and elegant with its ocean view, has lost its previous luster and is now overpopulated and in a state of chronic disrepair as it has tried to accommodate immigrants from Oriente, a code in the local, racist vernacular for the black culture of the Caribbean. Similarly, the elegant and prosperous Havana of the 1950s is now in ruins, incapable of fulfilling its own Revolutionary expectations of bringing into the fold those who originally found themselves outside the urban middle classes associated with American interests. The text seems to suggest that, amidst the wreckage of a Revolutionary project that, like the building, has failed to keep up with its grand purpose, Pedro Juan and his characters can only deal with the general state of crisis by literally shitting on one another.

It can be further argued that, if a place like the bathroom has lost its original function, then there is no longer a proper place for the shit that traditionally belongs in it. In her now canonical

work on pollution and purity, Mary Douglas defined dirt, including shit, as matter out of place. In this text, the shit that exceeds the bathroom in the *solar* as well as the logic informing Pedro Juan’s daily hygiene practices seem to illustrate the confusion of a system that has not been able to adapt to new demands. According to Mary Douglas, the fact that shit has a proper place—thus making it possible to find it out of place—underlines the implication that the very existence of dirt presupposes a system. For shit, as matter out of place:

implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. (36)

The persistent abundance of dirt in inappropriate places—as is the case of shit on the *azoteas*, the stairs, the street, and, at a more literary level, in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s text—is the sign of a system that has gone afoul. According to Joshua Esty:

[e]ven when understood according to the representational codes of realism [...], shit has a political vocation: it draws attention to the failures of development, to the unkept promises not only of colonial modernizing regimes but of postindependence economic policy. (32)

It is indeed suggestive to compare Esty’s statement about postcolonial Africa with Gutiérrez’s view of Post-Cold War Communist Cuba. In fact, a way to read “el baño más asqueroso del mundo” (*Trilo-*

gía 81) is to assume that Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's scatological aesthetics points to the extreme degradation that the new political conditions have provoked. That is, the bathroom behaves as a thinly veiled allegory of the state of the nation, as the characters in *Trilogía* have been degraded to the lowest stratum of civility by a dramatic succession of historical transformations. Note, however, that shit appears as a formless object, pervading, it seems, not only physical reality but also moral and spiritual domains. In its formlessness, shit is at once overdetermined and meaningless; the allegorical structure it appears to sustain is imprecise: there seem to be no guilty parties and no moment can be singled out as the point at which things took a wrong turn.

If hunger follows a logic of scarcity and, somewhat inconsistently, shit one of abundance, sex, the one local renewable resource, follows an economic logic that depends on reliable relays of supply and demand; a libidinal logic, that is, that operates within a stable market, which is often literalized in the figure of the *jineteras*. Sex in *Trilogía* is frequent, explicit, and decontextualized; something that just happens because it is the only thing that can happen. As people have control over their own bodies, and little else, sex appears as the one source of gratification in an otherwise sensually impoverished reality. The first reward granted by sex is escapism since it provides a temporary respite from generalized frustration:

Sólo andaba por ahí, caminando por mi pequeña isla, conociendo gente, enamorándome y templando. Templaba mucho: el sexo desenfrenado me ayudaba a escapar de mí mismo. (30)

In fact, the narrator claims that he has had twenty-two sexual partners in the last two years. In spite of Pedro Juan's claim of "falling in love," sex appears in the text divorced from traditional narratives of love, seduction or even attraction. Uncoupled from affect and its sentimentalized expression, sex becomes a generalizable commodity. Outside of the more common circuits of exchange between tourists and local prostitutes—in which sex is transacted for money (or its equivalence in meals and foreign products)—sex frequently assumes the place of money in Pedro Juan's Centro Habana. Throughout the text, sex competes with dollars in the underground market economy and is used as the currency that allows a given Cuban to obtain medicine, secure housing, or procure food. Having access to one of the many products in short supply allows a local resident to reproduce, at an internal level, an asymmetrical power relation that is otherwise constituted externally by foreigners.

That sex in *Trilogía* forms part of a traditional production system would seem to justify why semen appears almost as often as shit in the text. Yet, unlike shit, semen has a productive biological function; rather than representing the body's waste, semen represents the body's reproductive potential. In the text, however, semen is seen as infinitely more valuable than shit for reasons other than the purpose of reproduction. At moments, Pedro Juan condemns the unproductive side of masturbation with phrases such as "Detesto botar así la leche" (92). Curiously, semen seems to be "wasted" only to the degree that it is ejaculated outside a woman's body not because sex is practiced with aims

other than biological reproduction, but because semen represents a symbolic reserve of manliness. Semen thus becomes a fund of masculine domination that, seemingly finite, is too precious to waste in an “unproductive” act such as masturbation. In spite of his active sexual life with a variety of partners, Pedro Juan does not father any children in the narrative space of *Trilogía*. Semen would thus seem to have a surplus value in its symbolic exchange as cultural capital.

The cultural value of semen is nowhere more obvious than in the case of the character nicknamed Supermán. In the pre-revolutionary days, Supermán had a show in a cabaret for tourists, “el *Shangai*.” Dressed only in a red and blue cape, Supermán’s show consisted in getting an erection and ejaculating on the stage night after night, having as his sole source of sensual stimulation a naked blond woman standing offstage whom only he could see. What the public witnessed, then, was a silent, motionless man who produced large amounts of semen without ever touching his “Superpinga” of thirty centimeters, or twelve inches, or a foot, as he comfortably translates from the metric system to the American system with the demeanor of someone who has done it many times. His success, however, came with a price. As he tells Pedro Juan, Supermán could not have normal sexual intercourse with his wife during the twelve-year span that he worked in the cabaret. He explains that:

si templábamos como Dios manda y yo me venía, por la noche no podía hacer mi número en el *Shangai*. Yo tenía que acumular toda mi leche de veinticuatro horas para el espectáculo de Supermán. (62)

Leaving aside the ejaculatory imperative of male-centered sexual practices, Supermán’s tale can also be said to allegorize the historical situation. Like most local products in a system of economic dependency, Supermán’s semen does not enter domestic economic circuits: the national economy cannot afford to reserve it for local consumption; it must be “exported.”

The situation of Supermán in the ’50s resembles the phenomenon of the *jineteras* in the ’90s since in both cases the body is used to entertain tourists for profit. The indignity of the situation becomes negotiated in the case of Supermán in the name of the unequivocal signs of a prestigious masculinity. In the case of the *jineteras*, there is at times a discourse of necessity—one must “ganarse la vida,” “no quedarse de brazos cruzados”—and every now and then the hope of marriage and exile. It is interesting to note that what separates these two moments of exchange of Cuban sex for hard currency is precisely forty years of revolutionary government, with its zealous discourse on dignity at both the individual level and at the level of international relations. The indignity of Supermán’s method of making a living—an indignity to which he seems mostly oblivious at the time—takes an unexpected turn when, with old age, he develops diabetes, resulting in the amputation of his legs and, with them, his once famous penis and testicles:

Se levantó una pequeña manta que le cubría los muñones. Ya no tenía pinga ni huevos. Todo estaba amputado junto con sus extremidades inferiores. Todo cercenado hasta los mismos huesos de la cadera. Ya no quedaba nada. Una manguerita de goma salía del sitio donde estuvo la pinga y dejaba caer

una gota continua de orina en una bolsa plástica que llevaba atada a la cintura.

[...]

-Azúcar alta. Se fueron gangrenando las dos piernas. Y poco a poco me las fueron amputando. Hasta los cojones. ¡Ahora sí soy un tipo *descojonado!* (63)

In the gap that separates the figure of Supermán from the “tipo descojonado”—literally, a guy with no balls—that he becomes four decades later there is a whole generation of people educated in and by the Revolution, a generation that grows up with the promises of a New Man. What *Trilogía* seems to be suggesting is that both Supermán and the middle-aged Pedro Juan have been castrated—the former in a literal sense, the latter perhaps only metaphorically—by a history that has been rather unforgiving. Pedro Juan’s dignity is lost to unemployment, hunger, and the constant search for the ephemeral gratifications of sex. From this perspective, the New Man—a sort of socialist super hero—is now a mangled man.

Historically, the figure of the New Man became both the instrument and the goal of the Revolution as envisioned by one of its heroes, Che Guevara. Indeed, according to Che, not only did a total Revolution consist of a change of structures; it simultaneously depended upon, and aimed at, the creation of a New Man, unalienated and total (Mafud 66-74).⁷ The realization of this New Man would only be possible as the result of material sacrifice. In order to achieve the moral and national glory for which the Revolution stood, the New Man would have to do without goods and pleasures that had previously been taken for granted. In Che’s words:

No se trata de cuántos kilogramos de carne se coma o de cuántas veces por año pueda ir alguien a pasearse a la playa. [...] Se trata, precisamente, de que el individuo se sienta más pleno, con mucha más riqueza interior y con mucha más responsabilidad. El individuo de nuestro país sabe que la época gloriosa que le toca vivir es de sacrificio. [...] Si un hombre piensa que, para dedicar su vida entera a la revolución, no puede distraer su mente por la preocupación de que un hijo le falte determinado producto, que los zapatos de los niños estén rotos, que su familia carezca de determinado bien necesario, bajo este razonamiento deja infiltrarse los gérmenes de la futura corrupción. (Guevara 34-35)

By the time Gutiérrez writes *Trilogía*, however, the occasional scarcity that was required for the success of the Revolution has become unbearable, and the future corruption Che feared has taken its toll. The man that Communism has shaped since 1959 has become desperate, and the notion that Pedro Juan and his neighbors are ready to sell their own bodies, or anyone else’s, for just about anything, contrasts dramatically with the idealized New Man of the Cuban Revolution.

In fact, Pedro Juan speaks about the changed circumstances in characteristically pragmatic terms:

Es una nueva era. De repente el dinero hace falta. Como siempre. El dinero lo aplasta todo. Treinta y cinco años construyendo el Hombre Nuevo. Ya se acabó. Ahora hay que cambiar a esto otro. Y rápido. No es bueno quedarse rezagado. (97)

This new era is dominated by capitalism, but not quite the capitalism older Cubans

still remember. This is a clandestine type of capitalism, one that takes place in black markets and that can, until 1993, send you to jail if you are caught carrying dollars.⁸ Moreover, jail time competes with dollars as ways of measuring the rather simple interplay of supply and demand, with the price for selling lobster in the streets rarely exceeding seven days in prison, while selling red meat is estimated in three to four years. In sum, it is a type of capitalism all the more merciless because, lacking an official structure, it makes visible its dehumanizing effects. As suggested by Che and fully stated by Pedro Juan, talking about protein is counter-revolutionary.

In *Trilogía*, the New Man that was once the banner of the total revolution has become little more than a cruel animal. Indeed, an anti-epic and dystopian feeling permeates the beginning of “Anclado en tierra de nadie,” the first of the three series of vignettes that constitutes *Trilogía*. There Pedro Juan declares:

yo estaba desilusionado con el periodismo y comencé a escribir unos relatos muy crudos. En tiempos tan desgarradores no se puede escribir suavemente. [...] Escribo para pinchar un poco y obligar a otros a oler la mierda. Hay que bajar el hocico al piso y oler la mierda. Así aterrorizo a los cobardes y jodo a los que gustan amordazar a quienes podemos hablar. (85)

The crisis Cubans are undergoing does not allow for a refined aesthetics. On the contrary, it requires a project that helps to conceptualize the indignity of lived life in a vivid way. Hunger, shit, and sex function not only as indices of or metaphors for the generalized state of degradation

under which people are forced to live, and some would like to ignore, but it also assumes a very literal meaning. It has a documentary value Gutiérrez is only too often willing to underline.

When asked about the scatological themes in his writing, Pedro Juan casually drops the editorial phrase “Dirty Realism” as a preemptive strike that places him immediately in an already established genealogy.⁹ The term Dirty Realism was coined by the British journal *Granta* in a 1983 issue. Interestingly, “Dirty Realism: New Writings from America,” the umbrella title under which “[t]he belly-side of contemporary [American] life” (Buford 4) would presumably be exposed, was also a descriptive term for an aestheticized take on a particularly rich and prosperous historical reality. The editor of *Granta* defined Dirty Realism in these terms:

It is not a fiction devoted to making the large historical statement. [...] It is instead a fiction of a different scope—devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture—and it is entirely appropriate that its primary form is the short story [...] these are strange stories: unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch daytime television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music [...] they drink a lot and are often in trouble [...] drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism. [...] This is a curious, dirty realism about the belly-side of contemporary life, but it is realism [...] so insistently informed by a discomfiting and sometimes elusive irony—that it makes the more traditional realistic novels seem ornate, even baroque in comparison. (Buford 4)

It is interesting to note that, like American Dirty Realism, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's prose is flauntingly unadorned, has a discomforting tone, and deals with characters who "drink a lot and are often in trouble." However, there are three key differences between what *Granta* defined as Dirty Realism and Gutiérrez's writing. In the first place, the irony is hard to miss in the comparison between the American low-lives who are "drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism," and a society in which the scarcity of products is overwhelming.¹⁰ Second, it seems fair to say that one of the aspects that make Gutiérrez's realism interesting is precisely its connection with the main ideological disputes of the century's history, a history that middle-America can only grasp symbolically. Third, the texts included by *Granta*, such as those by Raymond Carver, are not even remotely as dirty as Gutiérrez's realism.

To be sure, an ethos of dirt informs *Trilogía* as its own aesthetic project. In fact, the ex-journalist turned writer within the text calls the new profession he has embraced "revolcador de mierda," which consists of writing

la realidad. Al duro. La tomas tal como está en la calle. La agarras con las dos manos y, si tienes fuerza, la levantas y la dejas caer sobre la página en blanco. Y ya. Es fácil. Sin retoques. A veces es tan dura la realidad que la gente no te cree. Leen el cuento y te dicen 'No, no, Pedro Juan, hay cosas aquí que no funcionan. Se te fue la mano inventando.' Y no. Nada está inventado. Sólo que me alcanzó la fuerza para agarrar todo el masacote de realidad y dejarlo caer de un solo golpe sobre la página en blanco. (103-04)

Pedro Juan's aesthetic claim is that of unmediated representation. In this explanation of his artistic project, "la realidad" appears as too disagreeable to handle. However, this stinking *tranche de vie* has enough aesthetic power to not need "fiction," "retouching" or even "editing." The narrator suggests that contemporary reality in Centro Habana is in and of itself shit with aesthetic value. The merit of Pedro Juan's project, then, seems to be more moral than artistic since he is one of the few people who can handle "reality" as it is, which, by implication, is a necessary act in times of crisis.¹¹

Although ostensibly made within the realm of fiction, the claim of truthfulness in *Trilogía* becomes almost contractual. It is written in the first person singular and bears all conventional marks of autobiography: the name of the protagonist-narrator coincides with the name of the author as does his profession, his address, the names of his children.¹² All of these coincidences seem to promise a certain commitment to the real as in traditional forms of autobiography and ethnography, photography and journalism, all practices that are emulated in this text in one way or another. One instance can serve to illustrate the ways in which the effort to portray the exact truth prompts the writer to offer meta-commentary on the writing of the text. At one point, the narrator explains how his arm got trapped outside a moving elevator, in a space that measured exactly three centimeters. Pedro Juan writes that "(para escribir esto lo acabo de medir)," between a set of parenthetical marks that suggest the momentary suspension of narrative illusion in the flow of fictional prose (30). At times, however, certain narrative elements become quite fantastic, even manic in a way

reminiscent of Reinaldo Arenas's writing. For instance, the frequent allusions to neighbors from different *azoteas* masturbating at the same time become simply unbelievable rather than corroborations of the reality of the rest of the text. In this way, a text that has made such a conscious effort to locate the reader in a strongly referential narrative space simultaneously invites her to suspend belief as it pushes its own testimonial authority to questionable levels. As the text suggests, its degree of referentiality is an issue, which puts *Trilogía* in a specific aesthetic position. In spite of Pedro Juan's explicit claims of telling things as they are, to see the scatological landscape of *Trilogía* as the naked truth would be the same as to confuse nature with naturalism. For, obviously, the real shit that appears everywhere in the text is, above all else, an aesthetic device.

If disinterest is the primary condition of beauty, the narrator's artistic project is clearly not beautiful. For it is precisely in granting access to a given reality through its use of a style that seeks to abolish distance that his text becomes paradigmatic of artistic production in Cuba today. The narrator of *Trilogía* can confidently claim:

El arte sólo sirve para algo si es irreverente, atormentado, lleno de pesadillas y desespero. Sólo un arte irritado, indecente, violento, grosero, puede mostrarnos la otra cara del mundo, la que nunca vemos o nunca queremos ver para evitarle molestias a nuestra conciencia. (105)

And in an interview published in the Spanish newspaper *El País*, the author makes a similar claim:

La literatura debe explorar el lado más oscuro del ser humano. Tratamos de ocultar lo que creemos que es malo, pero creo que es ahí donde se encuentra lo verdadero. ("Pedro Juan")

Both statements, one in the text and the other in "person," point to concepts of what is "good" and "dis/agreeable" in art and help us understand the purpose of Gutiérrez's own brand of Dirty Realism: to unveil the ugly truth of human societies. More specifically, *Trilogía* is a "good" text—the object of a desire that is governed by reason, in Kant's terms—only in so far as it is also "dis/agreeable"—that which is perceived primarily through the senses. The possibility of reason as a bodily event is instrumental in Gutiérrez's writing, for his text needs to be perceived primarily through the senses in order to approximate the "truth." The most ambitious aim behind *Trilogía* resides in its capacity to turn the tastes of nature into the tastes of reflection. As Bourdieu states:

The object which 'insists on being enjoyed,' as an image and in reality, in flesh and blood, neutralizes both ethical resistance and aesthetic neutralization; it annihilates the distancing power of representation, the essentially human power of suspending immediate, animal attachment to the sensible and refusing submission to the pure affect, to simple aesthesis. In the face of this twofold challenge to human freedom and to culture (the anti-nature), disgust is the ambivalent experience of the horrible seduction of the disgusting and of enjoyment, which performs a sort of reduction to animality, corporeality, the belly and sex, that is, to what is common and therefore vulgar, removing any difference between those

who resist with all their might and
those who wallow in pleasure. (489)

A scatological aesthetics challenges cultural norms by being a natural sort of anti-nature, for it is in exposing the more animal aspects of human experience that the artifice of a cultural structure—Western and modern—is put in question. In the end, what is important about *Trilogía* is that the success or failure of the aesthetics of vulgarity has become the mark by which the (in)humanity of the reader will be measured. In fact, a literature that takes delight in the corporeality of the human is by definition “the near-perfect antithesis of [the] aesthetic disavowal” of pure aesthetics of the bourgeois order, thus challenging a social order that a very homogeneous First World takes for granted (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 200). So, if *Trilogía* is anti-bourgeois aesthetics, what bourgeois is Gutiérrez indeed threatening?

In what follows, I will analyze the implications of Gutiérrez’s aesthetics of vulgarity according to the political and social interests of various consumer groups. In order to map the interests and disinterests at stake in the judgment of *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*, I will invoke four reader figures through which the different responses to the text can be implicitly gauged. These are: the official Cuban reader, who encompasses the official responses made both inside and outside the island as a direct reflection of different political stances; the Cuban intellectual; the ethnographic reader, a non-Cuban reader who has his or her correlative in the ethnographic tourist; and, finally, the Postmodern reader. While the first three groups either like or dislike *Trilogía* largely on account of its testimonial character, I argue that it is the Postmodern reader the

one who finds Gutiérrez’s writing revolutionary within the politics of aesthetics itself.¹³

Very few people within Cuba are actually acquainted with Gutiérrez’s writing since most of his texts have not been published on the island.¹⁴ Although his work has been translated into twenty different languages, Gutiérrez only publishes in Spanish in Spain, where his work has had the widest exposure. At the same time, the Cuban government is aware of his fame outside of Cuba and knows that it is plainly impossible to ignore cultural figures like him with so much interactive tourism. Torn between the desire to recognize him and the political need to refuse to publish his dim, sad testimony of Cuban reality, UNEAC (the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos) came up with a curious solution. They asked Pedro Juan Gutiérrez to put together a series of new vignettes, which were carefully edited by UNEAC. In 2000, Ediciones Unión published 3,000 copies of these vignettes under the title *La melancolía de los leones*. Since then, Gutiérrez appears frequently at public readings and moves in the highest of Havana’s intellectual circles, but he is known exclusively as the author of *La melancolía*, a text that is comparable to the rest of his prose neither in its transgressive value nor in its popularity outside of Cuba.¹⁵ More recently, *Animal Tropical* seems to be headed for publication by Letras Cubanas, “pero sólo si no tachan ninguna palabra” (*Encuentro*). Judging from the tense relationship that exists between Gutiérrez and the state cultural apparatus, one may assume that the government considers his texts a destabilizing force. Why else prevent his texts from being published in Cuba? Similarly, most Cuban exiles tend to see in

Trilogía a testimony of Cuban reality that satisfies them completely, for it comes to validate their passionate anti-Communist views. The Cuban diaspora would probably see the excremental aesthetics of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez as representing the total failure of the Revolution. Both the government and the official opposition are more willing to manipulate the text than to judge it aesthetically, let alone determine the text's complex relation to reality.

In contrast with the official Cuban reader, those who would seem to be better prepared to judge the accuracy of the text are Gutiérrez's own neighbors, upon which he has based his characters. However, they do not have access to the text, they do not even know that such texts exist nor that Gutiérrez is a fiction writer. Gutiérrez prefers it that way, as he assumes that his neighbors will recognize themselves in the text and will feel intruded upon.¹⁶ By contrast, those Cubans who do have access to the text form part of a small intellectual elite who can usually travel. Regardless of their actual political opinions, most of these writers hold government jobs in the cultural sector, are officially recognized as writers, and regularly publish on the island. By most accounts, Cuban writers find Gutiérrez's text problematic, even if many of them have not even read it. Two arguments are usually made. On the one hand, they find no aesthetic value in Gutiérrez's writing, considering it too vulgar, too repetitive, and too fragmentary; in short, not literary enough. According to this argument, the fact that Gutiérrez writes about his own life makes it seem as though he is not really trying to aestheticize reality at all—a common critique is that “he has made the mistake to name his narrator after himself.” On the other hand, those who rec-

ognize that the merit of the text does not reside in the text's formal aspects but on its approximations to reality, find that the text is not really true to reality. Their reality, at any rate, is not the dirty, vulgar, or degraded reality of *Trilogía*.

In my view, these Cuban readers see the text as violating two aspects of their social order: first, the text is vulgar, a sort of representation they do not like; and second, they see in the text an unflattering portrait of a lifestyle in which they themselves are implicated. Both beauty in art and beauty in life can be seen as signs of a sublimated existence, the mark of “the truly human man.” If I am right and the aesthetic judgment of the Cuban intellectual is contaminated by these anxieties, then a concept of class, or at least distinction, is at stake. After all, none of these writers live in Centro Habana like Gutiérrez. To live in El Vedado, still the most prosperous neighborhood in Havana, to be able to travel, to hold a steady job in the cultural sector, are three marks of (relative) privilege that place someone slightly above the rest. It also helps if, on top of these three elements, you are more or less white. So the intellectuals' aesthetic response cannot be separated from class and racial anxiety, and the fear of being identified with the reality depicted by Gutiérrez. Are they the Cuban Revolution's bourgeoisie? Are they defending a given social order? Which one? Or if, as Mary Douglas pointed out, “our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications,” (37) what classifications are confused and by who are they cherished?

Those who have responded publicly—and positively—to the text are mostly non-Cubans. These readers can be

conveniently described as belonging to two different groups that may or may not overlap: the ethnographic readers and the Postmodern readers.¹⁷ As expected, the ethnographic reader sees in the text a “document” of what living in Centro Habana in 1994 was like, a reading that, as we have seen, the text encourages. In addition, the text’s constant appeal to the senses helps make the readers experience the reality portrayed as a “lived” experience. Indeed, the aesthetics of disgust deployed by Gutiérrez not only abolishes the distance between fiction and reality, but also does it in a way such that the reading becomes experiential. Mary Douglas addresses the degree of engagement presupposed in scatology when she states:

No experience is too lowly to be taken up in ritual and given a lofty meaning. The more personal and intimate the source of ritual symbolism, the more telling its message. The more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wide and certain its reception. (115)

By appealing to the “the common fund of human experience,” and by doing so in a “transparent” style, Gutiérrez’s text replaces the need for participant observation. The ethnographic reader can see how macro-politics has failed the individual without having to live through it.

The ethnographic reader of *Trilogía* is invited to see him or herself represented in the ethnographic tourist Pedro Juan sees from his *azotea* in one of the vignettes:

Miro por la ventanita. Desde el Malecón una turista toma fotos de los edificios destruidos. El marido toma un vídeo, de lo mismo. Les encanta la vi-

sión sobre los escombros. Desde lejos ofrecen una imagen deliciosa. (268)

Among the ethnographers, Europeans, in general, and Spaniards, in particular, seem to be the most prevalent. Indeed, since it opened itself up to tourism in the 1990s, Cuba has welcomed hundreds of thousands of Europeans every year, many attracted to the promise of witnessing an anachronistic world. The ruined and dilapidated capital offers itself to the ethnographic tourist as the testimony of a world that is no more by simultaneously prompting two different and contradictory experiences that are otherwise lost to “civilized” Europe. On the one hand, Havana bears the visible traces of the 1950s with its cars, its architecture, and its music as though it had remained unspoiled by Western economic development, and thus free of Japanese cars, skyscrapers, and techno music. In Johannes Fabian’s terms, Havana seems to permit contact with a society, or a culture, that is perceived as backward with respect to the one to which the observer belongs, a phenomenon he called “denial of coevalness” and described as the cultural assumptions that both inform and allow for anthropological observation.¹⁸ On the other hand, the view of a *passé* Communism that is still operative even without the world political structure of the Cold War to sustain it gives the observer a glimpse into an alternative lifestyle whose utopian impulse the liberal subject of Western democracy cannot help but feel nostalgic about. At the same time, however, it also functions as a cautionary example of what could have happened in the West had international Communism been embraced, thus allowing the observer to indulge in a form of guilt-free triumphalism.¹⁹

In *Trilogía*, what I have called the ethnographic tourist is described by Pedro Juan in these terms:

El tipo tenía todas las trazas del expedicionario europeo. Hasta una mochila verde olivo. Un aventurero que explora la selva tropical y escucha a las putas para ampliar su horizonte. El tipo se sonreía y escuchaba. Ellas hablaban y gesticulaban y sonreían. Intentaban ser simpáticas para sacarle más plata, aunque aquí las putas son muy baratas. Ah, el trópico al alcance de los bolsillos. (117)

In the passage, the tourist becomes a European explorer who attempts to experience the exotic by venturing into the *terra incognita* of tropical sex. But the unmistakable military figuration of the tourist who wears an olive green backpack—the color of military uniforms, and, more specifically, that of the *Comandante*, which he still wears for official acts—seems to imply that the European visits Havana dressed in a sort of camouflage, as though he were “going native” in Cuba by making a Revolutionary fashion statement. As opposed to other Caribbean islands, which offer fantasies ranging from a pre-Adamic paradise to the ultimate colonial experience in the mode of former sugar plantations turned into luxury hotels, Cuba not only offers all the requisites of exoticism in its climate, its sensuality, and its music, but also permits the tourist to experience a twentieth-century world untouched by the very industrialization and capitalist excess that allows him or her to travel to the island to witness it first hand.

Within this context, it is not surprising that Spain has played a pivotal role in Cuba’s recent and tentative reentry into the world economy. Isolated by the US,

Cuba has had to look elsewhere in its search for capital investment, and Spain, itself emergent as part of the European Union, has quickly stepped into the breach. At the cultural level, Spain has become the privileged “natural” outlet for the culture produced within the island after the collapse of state-sponsored publishing houses in Cuba. In fact, Gutiérrez publishes with Anagrama, a Barcelona imprint, and has been given the Alfonso García Ramos 2000 novel award in Canarias for his novel *Animal Tropical*. It is perhaps understandable that Spanish readers, accustomed to the excesses of the Spanish *Movida* can find Gutiérrez’s brand of Dirty Realism appealing. But, more important, the Spanish interest for Gutiérrez’s writing seems inseparable from a form of what might be called ethnographic tourism. Kant suggests that there is an enormous amount of beauty in seeing disasters from a sheltered place, as we can fantasize about the idea that maybe we could be a match.²⁰ As Pedro Juan puts it: “Los escombros desde lejos son deliciosos [...] para verlos por una semana” (268-70). Are we paying to feel like participants in a historical drama for six days and seven nights? Can we just read *Trilogía* and not even bother to go?

Consider for a moment the notion that *Trilogía*’s purpose is to unveil a human truth that transcends the local circumstances of contemporary Cuba. What, then, would those truths be? Or, put differently, what truths are those that the ethnographic reader misses in his or her attention to the local? In fact, although very grounded in a given place and time, Gutiérrez seems to take delight in describing impulses that go beyond cultural specifics, thus appealing to a common fund of human experience. A literature whose

tropes persistently revolve around hunger, excrement, and sex cannot but connect to a universally human form of animality that transcends the local and the historical. If behind the denial of corporeality implied in the notion of pure aesthetic appreciation lies the legitimate claim to dominate a social order, what we find in Gutiérrez's writing is precisely the impossibility of sustaining such a claim. For the political value of *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* resides in its abolition of the distinctions between nature and culture, thus redefining the assumptions that inform—and are informed by—aesthetic judgment. Reading *Trilogía* as an aesthetic experience prompts us to question the premise that any one reader—either inside or outside of Cuba—is indeed superior to the *animal tropical* of Gutiérrez's texts. The attraction of a form of art that is indecent, disgusting, and violent is that it forces all readers to confront their own animality and rethink the body and its instincts, thus unveiling, and even shaking, the very careful structure of good manners, good behaviour, and good taste by which Western bourgeois culture has measured its own civilization and has shaped our cultured selves. A structure, needless to say, that we can never totally rid ourselves of.

It is in this sense, then, that the Postmodern reader can relate to the aesthetic project of *Trilogía*. The Postmodern reader can be imagined as one who is tired of beauty being beautiful and finds that novels with a carefully orchestrated architecture have their own way of being violent. In Bourdieu's terms, how much freedom can "distance" and "disinterestedness" offer if the aesthetic experience is bound to yield a pre-conditioned outcome? Subverting traditional distinctions of taste, the Postmodern reader can find in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's prose an aesthetics that

consists of turning the tastes of nature into the tastes of reflection. Bourdieu claims that the key to a social order resides in pre-verbal ideas of what is good, beautiful, decent, acceptable, moral, appropriate, etc.²¹ Here is where the social trap lies since a member of society that opts for the opposite—the bad, the dirty, the indecent, the immoral—runs the risk of being systematically disciplined and punished, thus setting the regulatory apparatus that constitutes bourgeois culture into motion. As an aesthetics that appeals to so many interests, *Trilogía* unveils the very nature of culture. There is no beauty that is disinterested, and no art that offers redemption. For the Postmodern reader, art should not even pretend to do so. If the limits to the monopoly of humanity are what is really at stake in Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's Dirty Realism, there seems to be no one side in which one would like to be caught dead. And here, I think, resides the beauty of it.

Notes

¹ Kant establishes that "[o]nly when the need is satisfied can one distinguish who among the many has taste or does not" (96). For Bourdieu, aesthetic distance is the *mark* of a life of ease (5).

² The boundaries between function and form are traditionally thought to be blurred in Socialist countries as art is expected to be didactic. Although the popularity of art consumption in Cuba clearly results from the cultural and educational policies developed by the revolutionary project, it is necessary to note that film, in particular, is a passion that predates 1959 (see John King's *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America*). After 1959, however, the isolation of Cuba has fostered an additional function to foreign film, as it allows people to see realities different from their own. In this essay, nonetheless, I will concentrate on Cuban art—literature, in particular—as received by both Cubans and foreigners during the *Período Especial*.

³ There is a presumably large overlap between the life of the author and that of the protagonist-narrator. For the sake of clarity, however, I will refer to the author as Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, or just Gutiérrez. Pedro Juan, as such, is the name of the character that is the protagonist-narrator of *Trilogía*. For a discussion of the autobiographical in *Trilogía*, see Esther Whitfield, “Autobiografía Sucia: The Body Impolitic of *Trilogía sucia de La Habana*.”

⁴ *Solares* are vividly described by Fogel and Rosenthal as:

[...] maisons à moitié délabrées où les logements donnent sur des cours intérieures. Univers surpeuplé, hanté à toute heure par la musique—la rumba surtout, mère de tous les rythmes cubains. La vie grouille dans la rue, sur les terrasses; enfants près des mères, rires d’adolescentes, matrons regnant sur leur maisonnée; on s’interpelle de balcon à balcon dans le bruit des radios, télévisions ou cassettes, le volume sonore poussé à fond. Il ne s’agit pas seulement de ghettos noirs, mais de mondes autonomes avec leur façon de parler, de manger, de prier, de se distraire, leurs tambours et leurs divinités. (Fogel 429)

[...] partially deteriorated houses where rooms look over enclosed courtyards. Overcrowded universe, *solares* are haunted by music day and night—particularly by the rumba, the mother of all Cuban rhythms. Life simmers in the streets, on the terraces; with children close to their mothers, teenagers laughing, matrons reigning over their households; people call one another from balcony to balcony amidst the sounds of radios, televisions, and tapes, the volume always at its loudest. They are not just black ghettos, but autonomous worlds with their own ways of speaking, eating, praying, and playing, with their own drums and their own gods.

⁵ While the writing in the first series of vignettes is behaviorist in tone, it does achieve some level of stylization and psychological depth in the last series of vignettes, “Sabor a mí.” In that sense, one can witness the protagonist, who proclaims himself to be a writer, become one in the text; thus producing a very self-evident type of *Kunsterroman*.

⁶ There are some excellent studies on the relationship between scatology and politics of domination. For the role played by hygiene politics in the case of the American occupation of Philippines, see the articles by Warwick Anderson and by Joshua Esty, from which this quotation has been taken (29).

⁷ Mafud further justifies the importance of the New Man in the context of Socialism by stating that:

En todo pensamiento socialista existen dos ideas fundamentales: la revolución (el cambio de estructuras) y la creación del nuevo hombre (‘el hombre total’). [...] Lo que define hoy al socialismo es su concepto de hombre y no su concepto de sociedad [porque el] *concepto de construcción de la nueva sociedad siempre está sometido al concepto del hombre que se quiere crear*. (70, emphasis in the original)

⁸ The possession of foreign currency was penalized by Decree No. 140, signed on August 13, 1993. See Monzón Paz and Vázquez Aguiar.

⁹ Gutiérrez, personal conversation.

¹⁰ The narrator complains: “Me hacía falta un poco de ron, pero no había forma de conseguirlo. Yo tenía algún dinero pero no había nada que comprar” (11).

¹¹ Interestingly, the illusion of recording reality “as it is” with no authorial interference is a notion traditionally associated with both photography and ethnographic writing. This is the view traditionally held among the general public in relation to photography, and among traditional ethnographers. However, many authors today advocate for the opposite view that unveils the importance of the author’s selecting, observing, and “writing/codifying” the text that becomes the “re-

corded" information. I subscribe to this view. For more on this, please see Bourdieu's *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* in relation to photography; and James Clifford, "Partial Truths" in the case of ethnography.

¹² For the contractual aspect of autobiography, see Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*. For a discussion of the autobiographical in *Trilogía*, see Whitfield's "Autobiografía Sucia."

¹³ Gutiérrez states that most readers of *Trilogía* focus on either sex, or politics, or poverty, but only a few have the sensitivity necessary to understand his work (see Gutiérrez, "Interview" in *Playboy Brazil*). The types of readers listed by Gutiérrez are similar to those I propose in this article. It is necessary to clarify, however, that the classifications I have devised fundamentally belong to the realm of speculation, although I think that these types of readers substantially correspond to flesh and blood readers. Behind the tendencies underlying foreign reception is, in fact, the statistical power offered by concrete data, such as number of editions, translations, awards, interviews, etc. that *Trilogía* has spun since its publication in 1998. In the case of readers inside Cuba, however, I will base my judgment on personal conversations held with various people in Cuba who were oblivious to the fact that their opinions would be used. This method is, in fact, very commonly used in the case of Cuba due to a number of obvious practical constraints, including the lack of availability of official data, censorship, self-censorship, and the need to protect well-meaning people (see, for example, the section "Avis" in Fogel's *Fin de siècle*). Nonetheless, I have figured these types of readers with the conviction that, although speculative, they are representative of today's tendencies of consumption not only of the Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's aesthetics of disgust but also of Cuba as a cultural and political symbol.

¹⁴ Expressed by Gutiérrez during personal conversations, and, also, known by personal experience. Indeed, on an extremely hot July afternoon in 2001, I ventured into Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's building. I had managed to get his address. I had been there that morning. I had walked up the eight flights that would lead me to his house, only to find no one. Puzzled by the lack of

response and unsure about the address, I asked everyone I ran into on my way up, on my way down, at the front door, "Is this where Pedro Juan Gutiérrez lives?" "¿Quién?" they asked. I could not believe they lived next to a famous person and did not know his name. Maybe they wanted to identify my accent. Others had already been curious, though mainly street vendors and *jinetes*. I clarified "Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, the writer." No writer lived there, I was informed. Was I looking for the journalist, perhaps? Four, five times I heard the same thing. I began to suspect the journalist was in fact the person I was looking for. Yes, he lives on the eighth floor. He must be out. Try later. I came back later that day and finally found him at home. That was the first of several encounters I have had with him. The very few times that I quote Pedro Juan Gutiérrez come from these personal conversations.

¹⁵ As I have seen, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez dismissed in a second someone who expressed his admiration for *La melancolía*. Apparently, in the eyes of its author, *La melancolía* is only a pale approximation of what he considers his *oeuvre*.

¹⁶ Gutiérrez, personal conversation. See also "Interview" in *Playboy Brazil*.

¹⁷ There are other readers that I will not consider right now. Among them, the readers of pornography, acknowledged by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez during the interview that appeared in *Encuentro*. Further proof is that an interview with him appeared in *Playboy*. That Gutiérrez's prose also appeals to consumers of pornography further supports my claim of *Trilogía* as an aesthetic experience that abolishes distance and disinterestedness.

¹⁸ See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object*.

¹⁹ For a discussion on the various forms of nostalgia that Cuba's recent history and culture spawn today, see Jean Franco's *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*.

²⁰ Kant refers here to the spectacle offered by natural disasters when seen from a safe place, as they:

elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind,

which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature. (144-45)

²¹ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Outline of a Theory of Practice*, and Guillermina De Ferrari, "Partial Objects: Body, Text, and Subjectivity in Caribbean Autoethnographic Texts."

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