



BYE BYE HAVANA

Utopia is behind us

a film by J. Michael Seyfert



Contents

Return to Utopia	3
Dead Men Working	11
Todo Es Ilegal	17

Return to Utopia

Delirious in the tumble of my new-found freedom, far away from the mediocre crowds that have been enfolding me out West, I walk down Campanario towards the Malecon. A sniffy Caribbean breeze squeezing tears from my eyes, I pass chicos playing baseball with rocks and sticks, salsa blares from boom-boxes placed everywhere at opened windows, filling the tropical air with sexy, brassy music and, no doubt, drowning out the puritanical incantations of revolutionary doctrine which, after over half a century, have yet to subdue the hedonistic Afro-Cuban culture. Marxist maybe, but communism here has a certain cha-cha-cha. No one knows my name, yet it seems we've all been friends for a lifetime. I smile contently, is this home? To me Cuba is a place of symbols, full of calm equilibrium. There is no keeping up with the Joneses, they don't have any Joneses.

I prefer the electric neighbourhoods of central Havana, the almost hopeless decay of these grandiloquent ruins filled by a radiant people, who seem to have everything, except money, but everything that money can't buy.

I question the cultural messages that deign to tell me who I am, scanned, delimited, controlled and utterly powerless to stop it all; the friends and colleagues who seem to mold me and bind me and pigeonhole me. I wonder aloud, repeatedly, just why the hell I do the things I do, and if those things are really all that good for me anymore, and what I might do to heave them over the side like so much stagnant ballast. I ask myself, "How would I really like to live? In what kind of society or non-society would I feel most comfortable? What do I really want to do with myself? Regardless of their practicality, what are my true wishes and desires? Will Mr. Frederer's work machine (*1) be my destiny until I die of heart disease or cancer at 62? Will this have been my life? Have I imagined it like this? Is ironical resignation the only way out, hiding from myself, my deceptions for the rushing years that remain? Maybe everything is really ok, maybe I am just being overdramatic? Has nothingness become a real possibility? I resolve to castrate this sinister ideology with a karmic switchblade and a daiquiri frappe.

Does Truth exist? Certainly not at the Inglaterra Hotel terraza, said to once have been a Bohemian hangout, poking at Central Park. Here they come to get it, the booze, the mulatas, the kicks, whatever the dose.

Pink-skinned, camera-toting, snack-munching Mojito-swilling tourist dollars have come to town. Maybe Truth is in the process of being created, and the same goes for equity, perfection, beauty and grace? Their embryonic stage would then explain the existence of injustice, squalor, suffering, disgrace and ugliness.

The band plays “Quizas”, sung a million and one times to the loveless chuckle of maracas and a droopy bass. Krauts discussing law and order over pork chops, Tommies sending Che-postcards, Irish with fluorescent green berets, Spaniards and French panning the latest handycams on young mulatas negotiating a meal or just a glimpse at the yuma’s wallet. Pinga! Pulling on an over-sized faux Cohiba, the ritualized cocktail mix of parading mulatas up and down the sidewalk, some greeting security guards, nice braids, but the 50-something Italians prefer the Congolese look, under 20, of course.

Dreams, ideal visions, utopias, yearnings, alternatives; aren’t these just new illusions to seduce us once again into participating in a scheme for “progress”?

On the corner of Lealtad and San Lazaro Felix, a young black man offers me his rationale, why work is not an option. He used to be a fire fighter, but while lots of buildings collapse, for sure one every day, pay is ubiquitously low, say \$10 per month, so he quit. I say, yeah, but let’s assume you make \$2,500 per month as a fire fighter in New York, after rent, parking, pizza and taxes, you’ll have just about \$10 left. And should you have a mortgage and skip it, you’d be one of a million homeless. Felix agrees without knowing what I’m talking about. He now sells stuff, offers to rent me his house for \$15 per day, a block from the Malecon, a cop across the street watching us intently. Felix points out, that while life may be tough everywhere, not just in Havana, others do have certain freedoms, like travel, so you have something to tell your grandkids. He would like to at least once see Jamaica, track his family roots, it’s so close to Cuba, but hardly imaginable he’ll make it there.

Ed’s a physical education teacher in his mid fifties. He hopes my film material will make it out of the country, because he says, the world needs to see “the shit that goes down in Cuba.” From 1968 to 1973 he was in East Germany to teach, met Hanna a fellow teacher, who he wanted to marry. He shows me his old photos and sentimental letters and a copy of the national anthem of the former DDR.

Now he works as a cook, because as a teacher there’s little to supplement his income. As a cook, there’s Ham. He points at the plate inside the house, perched on a stool, cheese, ham cubes, pickles and cleverly cut plastic straws as picks. He’s catering a party. “I steal this food”, he confides, not the least proud of it. Ten guests will have to be fed. Fortunately a big bottle of no-name brandy and some 1 peso smokes will supplement the buffet. Ed tells me that after his tenure in East Germany it was verboten to even consider marrying a foreigner. So he lost his love and today, 30 years later, still feels sad and angry. This is just mierda, no place on earth suffers like Cuba, he insists. Look around, girls from all over the island come to Havana to prostitute themselves for a buck, a meal, an illusion to create a liaison with a foreigner, whoever. I point

out a similar syndrome in respect to Los Angeles and its promise of fame and fortune. Ed does not see any similarity. A teacher colleague of his, he says, went to work in Venezuela on a government job. He's paid \$2,000 per month, however each payday a Cuban government official shows up to sign for his cheque and leaves his friend with \$100. I have heard similar stories, where the Cuban government charges foreign companies international wage equivalents, but passes only a small fraction of this money to the performer or worker. Athletes who win medals and earn prizes abroad, hand their purse over to Fidel. A boxer who receives a \$10,000 prize delivers it to El Comandante and will have to be satisfied with certain privileges. All for one, one for all.

Ed wants me to know that everyone here lives in total fear. Hefty prison sentences for citizens, the tourists move on. Marta, my hostess tells me about a jinitera friend of hers, who was busted with an Italian tourist, and could have expected 2 years. The judge told her to bring \$250 USD at the next hearing and all would be worked out.

Pepo's cousin had some friends from Spain staying over at their Vedado highrise apartment and were busted for accommodating foreigners without a license, initially threatened with losing their apartment, eventually settled for \$1,500 USD, an astronomical sum in the context of this economy.

While not so evident on the surface, corruption is rampant. A survival tool. Enter a vivid black market and all shades of gray. And then there's a world of opulence and savoir vive, Vedado, Miramar or at Hotel Nacional, where exploiting the Buena Vista Social Club thing will have no end. \$60 USD tickets to see a local musical great is no cause for a tourist rebellion. I paid \$40 at Carnegie Hall.

Ed hopes the bearded monster will soon perish, while Raffa is thankful for his education and seemingly comfortable life. He credits not communism, but La Revolucion, it's victory and social progress. He thinks of himself as a true revolucionario, a fighter for his people and everyone in the collective third world. Unlike Ed, a white mestizo, who considers reality in Cuba to be an outrageous scam, Raffa, a mulato javao is content, expecting a fourth child with his wife Marlen, a black woman, who works 14 hours every other day at the city electrical plant administration. Raffa knows his way around and applies himself to provide for his family. He's a refrigeration technician despite his university degree, works his lousy government job, while freelancing all over the city for greenbacks. Short of an unnecessary car, his family enjoys considerable comfort, phone with caller ID, TV, stereo, 5 rooms of good quality in a well located colonial. Before him, less than 50 years ago, only wealthy Cubans and foreigners would ascend the marble staircase or lounge on his cast iron balcony overlooking the small park.

At San Nicolas just down from Neptuno I am being detained by city police while filming a 54 year old black man, who is a professional street cleaner. It's a sunny afternoon, a group of people chatting on the street corner, another group across the street, and a guy selling vianda, in this case pulling a handcart with 20 onions. I ask the street cleaner about his life, his family, his remuneration, if some people tipped him, which he says they don't. The State pays him \$2,50 USD per month. He has to pay rent, about \$0.50 cents per month. He has five kids, 3 sons, 2 daughters, they all work and contribute to the household. He appears content, holding a foot long piece of lead which he will use to solder something later. As we chat, my camera a foot from his face, we're joined by the onion seller, who wants to know if I am with "human rights." I am not. He winks, as if wanting to protect my "cover". He's a 5 time veteran, Angola, Nicaragua, etc.

He's proud to have served his country, introduces himself as a fervent comunista. Nevertheless he's opinionated about some of the shortfalls of the revolucion, that the citizens who flock to Havana from the provinces are considered "refugees." Why? he asks, how can you be refugee in your own country? A fat man on the corner and a skinny CDR character are aware of the onion sellers' opinions, unbecoming of the official spiel. One of them walks over to us and just stands there, "just listening," he claims. We ignore him at first, but then the onion seller tells him to take a hike, indicating this being a private conversation.

Now the fat guy walks over and also plants himself a few feet from us, in the middle of the street. Un mono en cada cuadra. One of many cops in this part of town, precisely, one cop per city block, appears in the background. He scans the situation, a foreigner with a big camera, an opinionated onion seller, a street cleaner, a potential counter revolution? So we are rudely interrupted by a two-hour long agonizingly redundant interrogation. Many radio calls with HQ. I am to stay put, the onion seller is being accused of giving Cuba a bad image.

I tell the officer that, the only thing giving Cuba a bad image right now is the fact that I am being detained for speaking leisurely with its citizens. More radio chatter, a patrol car approaches. There are no shuffles, no manhandling, no physical contacts, no threats of violence, no aggression, no insults exchanged, but the cop makes it clear that there's trouble. Another officer wants me to understand, that while this opinionated onion seller may say unfavourable things about Cuba, all other citizens would say exactly the opposite. I ask the cop to instruct me clearly on how to conduct a conversation with a citizen. Should I avoid any contact, what laws am I breaking, who may I speak with and who not. I ask, how come I am allowed to chat up anyone around Central Park, but in Central Havana there seems to be a problem.

The cops repeat the same nonsense over and over. They are really not very bright, consistent with their imperial cousins, but of course they know their powers. They have their instructions. Well programmed. In the end I am released, my personal data recorded, I pack my camera and wander around the corner, zig-zagging each block in the direction of my residence. I do not know

the fate of the onion seller, but I have a feeling he will be OK, might have to switch barrios to avoid the very neighbours that consider him a threat to the cause. A few days later I run into the onion seller who has no further desire to speak with me, “all’s well,” he opens and closes the conversation.

Oddly I have never been harassed by police in provincial areas and other cities, like here in the capital, specifically in Central Havana, the most decayed part of town, the hubbub of frustration and felicity. I am not afraid, but I have been cautioned. Siempre vigilantes. I am beginning to understand the meaning of this slogan. Spontaneous social control prevents breach. Reason, practicality, harmony, non-violence, ecology, economic efficiency, morality, all are values that must be enforced. Every Utopia is compulsory in its basic dimensions.

Strolling up Prado, the tree-lined boulevard connecting the Malecon and Central Park, I come across a crowd, formed like a waiting line to get into the cafeteria, lunchtime? A casting call? Anticipating an event? Then I notice a naked man sitting in front of the cafeteria’s main entrance on the curb, his clothes thrown a few feet beside him. A man next to me advises me to not photograph the situation, as it would give Cuba a bad image. His breath reeks of rum, I ignore him. I walk up to a police officer, who at a substantial distance, is observing the scene. Asking what’s going on, “just a crazy person” he explains, and, “No, nakedness is not legal”. So I wonder why he does not arrest the guy or at least order him to get dressed. He responds with indifference that a patrol car is on the way. I ask why such crazy people would want to give Cuba a bad image. He does not know, “they are simply loco”. At this time the naked man decides to get dressed. I ask the cop if the man will still be detained or punished, which he does not answer. As I walk on, a guy who apparently had followed me a few steps presses me to publicize my photo to the “entire world, the whole world must know! This man is demonstrating. He is hungry, not crazy. Hungry! Pinga!”

We sacrifice freedom for survival, new ideologies of renunciation arise and contaminate all our dreams and desires.

Shopping in Havana is an adventure of the third kind without any corporate hypnotism, actually often without any merchandise whatsoever. What kind of masochist beautician produce the ugly plastic comb I purchase for a whooping dollar, so sharp one could hijack a jet with it... I see women making a line along an empty counter, displaying some chewing gum, a comb and finally two varieties of hair clips. 20 women, six clips, three red, three blue.

Of course there are stores and then there are stores that cater strictly to the dollar economy excluding most people who are paid their pittance in pesos. Here you may buy a Korean glitter boom box for \$380 USD, if you saved up two annual salaries as a journalist, or have relatives in

Miami or otherwise connections to dollars. 2 million Cubans live abroad and many help support their relatives on the island if only incidentally.

A retired man walks up to me and assures me that things are “not easy.” He says the State does not treat old people well, he receives a \$3 pension, beyond the canasta basica (regular food rations) and the occasional pack of cigarettes. There are good things and bad things about Cuba; I ask if he could see this to be the case with all countries around the world. He does not know, but “no es facil” he insists. A woman approaches me: “Amigo, give me 10 kilos,” referring to 10 cents. I ask if that is a loan, we both laugh.

Society always means police, politics, repression, intimidation, opportunism, hypocrisy. Direct violence has been banned in order to preserve bureaucratized State violence. Even in the developed countries, consumer society is no longer what it used to be, work hours increase, purchasing power declines. Phenomena like homelessness, permanent unemployment, and “the new poverty” as they call it in Europe, have become widespread.

Cuba is as much in crisis as it is in transition. Regardless of whether one sees Castro as saviour or tyrant, the truth is that his revolucion has bestowed dignity, relative social justice, free healthcare, good education and peace upon a nation which has suffered from centuries of maltreatment. Indeed, the Cuban masses have never been better cared for by any prior government than they are under the current system. To learn of Cuba's history during the past five hundred years is to understand, with ringing clarity, why the revolucion was, if not inevitable, then at least successful.

To understand why it appears to be failing today is more complex and will require a healthy dollop of hindsight to be fully and wisely grasped. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, today, Cuba stands pummeled by an unworkable socialism on the one hand, and by a voracious market economy on the other and what began over fifty years ago seems spent, a notion by the palpable sense of pathos in Havana, a perception of a glory that is fading fast and shows scant sign of resuscitation.

No doubt, when faced with aggressive enemies or imminent destruction, it makes sense to focus the nation by limiting its prerogatives and "Patria o Muerte" has long been one of the revolucion's pet dictums. But soon, those exiguous nominations of either patriotism or death will simply not be enough, for they negate an entire slew of ideals that span their gelid extremes. There will have to be other choices for the Cubans, other points of view.


In response to predictions that his country is in transition, a few years ago, Raul Castro, brother of Fidel and minister of Cuba's armed forces, has stated that "...you cannot cover the sun with your finger." The coming eclipse, however, will not be obfuscation by a single digit, it'll be from a fistful of cash. The revolucion, which neither the crushing US embargo, nor the collapse of a

generous USSR subsidy, nor countless CIA plots ever managed to undermine, is finally face-to-face with its nemesis.

Even more pink-skinned, camera-toting, snack-munching Mojito-swilling tourist dollars are coming to town. The desires they stoke for me-me, more-more dollars, more things, more need, me-me, more-more will destroy the "old" ways. Yes, the bad, the autocracy, the suppression of information, the police state, the restraint on travel, the incarcerations... all that, but along with it, the good too, for they are part and parcel of the same reality, and Cuba, in order to chase after individual profit and personal freedom, will need to relinquish much of its collective conscience. Hopefully, a trace of what was the humanity born of common forbearance, will endure in Cuba Nueva, and the compassion still so heartily proffered by the people will not be usurped by modernist demands for all the rights but none of the responsibilities.

Life on this planet isn't as agreeable as it could be. Maybe it was a fundamental mistake when nature came up with the idea "Man". Why should an animal walk on two feet and start thinking? In prehistoric times our deal seems to have been not so bad. 75,000 years ago, during the Stone Age, we were only few, food = game and plants, were abundant, and survival required only little working time and moderate efforts. To collect roots, nuts, fruits or berries and to hunt rabbits, birds, deer or fish, we spent only two or three hours a day. In our camps we shared meat and vegetables and enjoyed the rest of our time sleeping, dreaming, bathing, making love or telling stories. Some of us took to painting cave walls, carving bones or sticks, inventing new traps or songs. We used to roam about the country in gangs of 25 or so, with as little baggage and property as possible. We preferred the mildest climates and there was no "civilization" to push us away into deserts, tundras or mountains. The Old Stone Age must have been a good deal, because we stuck it out for tens of thousands of years, a long and happy period compared to the 200 years of the present industrial whoopy.

Then someone must have started playing around with seeds and plants and invented agriculture. It seemed a good idea at first, we didn't have to walk far away to get veggies and stuff. But life became more complicated and restrictive. We had to stay in the same place for at least several months, keep the seeds for the next crop, plan and organize work on the fields. Harvests also had to be defended against our still nomadic gatherer/hunter cousins, who kept insisting that everything belonged to everybody. Conflicts between farmers, hunters and cattle breeders arose. We had to explain to others that we had "worked" to accumulate our provisions, and they didn't even have a word for "work". With planning, withholding of food, defense, fences, organization and the the necessity of self-discipline, we opened the door to specialized social organisms like priesthood, chiefs, armies.



BYE BYE HAVANA - Utopia is behind us

We created fertility religions with rituals in order to keep ourselves convinced of our newly chosen lifestyle. The temptation to return to the free life of gatherers/hunters must always have been a threat. Whether it was patriarchy or matriarchy, we were on the road to statehood.

With the rise of civilizations in Mesopotamia, India, China and Egypt, the equilibrium between man and natural resources was definitely ruined. Centralized organisms developed their own dynamics; we became the victims of our own creations. Instead of two hours per day, we worked ten hours per day and more in the fields and construction grounds of the pharaohs and the Cesars. We died in their wars and were deported as slaves.

With the start of industrialization, things didn't get better. To crush the peasant rebellions and the independence of craftsmen in the towns, they introduced the factory system. Instead of foremen and whips, they used machines. They dictated to us our work rhythms, punished us automatically with accidents, kept us under control in huge halls.

Dead Men Working

Once again “progress” meant working more and more and under more murderous conditions. From 1440 hours per year in 1300 work rose to 3650 hours in 1850, in 1987 it was at 2152. The whole planet was turned into one giant work machine. And this work machine was simultaneously a war machine, for anyone outside or inside who dared to oppose it. War became industrial, just like work; indeed peace and work never had been compatible. You can’t accept to be destroyed by work and prevent the machine you create with it from killing others. You can’t refuse your own freedom and not threaten the freedom of others. War became as absolute as work.

The early work machine produced strong illusions of a “better future.” After all, the present was so miserable, the future must be better. People became convinced that industrialization would lay the basis for a society of more freedom, more free time and more pleasures. Utopians, socialist and communist alike, believed in industry. Marx thought that with its help man would be able to hunt, write poetry and enjoy life again. Why the big detour? Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Castro, and all the others, demand(ed) more sacrifice to build a new society.

But even socialism turned out to be just another trick of the work machine, extending its power to areas where private capital couldn’t or wouldn’t go.

The work machine doesn’t care if its managed by multinational corporations or state bureaucracies; it’s goal is the same everywhere: steal our time and our next generation’s time.

Over five thousand years of civilization and 200 years of accelerated industrial progress have left us with a terrible hang-over. Economy has become the goal in itself.

Russel is an Irish 52 year old divorced father of three. He plays saxophone in a band, mostly doing weddings. I ask what brings him from Cock to Cuba? Respectable relationships, like the one he’s in at home, an island full of churches and alcoholics. You know, you see each other and all that, but there’s no bang. He thinks religion is at fault and is really tired of it. This is his third trip. He met Alma in Santiago de Cuba a year ago. Alma is 32, has a child, no husband and her mother lives in. Russel’s amazed that an attractive woman like her would go for a guy like him. “They don’t really care what you look like or how old you are, do they?” As we chat about his travel experiences

he stops in mid-sentence and wants to know if “they are really sincere”. I explain that Cuban women like Alma are totally sincere when it comes to taking care of their family, their mother, grandmother, their kids. And that Russel may well be the recipient of a sincere dynamic, here

and now, and should treasure that, not for the sake of the “exchange”. Russel feels that Alma really takes care of him but understands that it’s unlikely he will move to Cuba or marry her and take her to Ireland with him. He has firm plans for returning the coming year. With his financial support Alma is now building an addition to her house to better accommodate her mother.

Pedro is amused and flattered when I call him a communications master. He’s a 24 year old, groomed young man working La Rampa, at Avenue 23, where nightlife consists of seemingly endless negotiations. Around the corner from a few 3 star hotels and down the block from the posh Hotel Nacional, sprayed by forceful Caribbean breezes, some 200 young women assemble in front of night clubs and coffee shops. Pssst, ven aca!

Similar to the spectacle at Central Park, but more vibrant. Ding dong, several cops patrolling the side walk, occasionally checking an ID. Pedro is one of a small number of smooth operators, tropical blondish with the matching fake Rolex. He would like the terms hustler or pimp, explaining that all these girls are free or come with their boy friends or husbands, who will often identify themselves as “cousins,” the prospective John is appropriately called “uncle,” consistent with his view on fauna.

In Cuba there are no brothels, porno mags, no strip clubs, no table dancing, no Penthouse, no crack whores, not even sexy ads for toothpaste. Just chicas fishing for food from between \$5 to \$50 a bite.

Pedro would accept a small commission for a typically unnecessary introduction to the chica of your interest, as well as inform prospective tios of the rules of La Rampa. I do not perceive any competition between the chicas, their cousins and cousin’s cousins. All seems as natural and harmless as a girl scout party, no cookies, just milk.

I later learn that here, pornography is understood to be the voyeuristic act of observing a sexual performance, live in a room. This experience may be purchased in sleazy barrios in places known as 5 y 1, where everyone from deaf and blind to mutilated to gay, lesbians and transvestites offer sex for \$5 and \$1 to the house for 1/2 hr, Thus 5 and 1. Cienfuegos y Monte is such a barrio, four blocks from Central Park and all the way to Chinatown, sex is business as usual. Illegal. Pssst, Come here, pingueros, grimy, old whores, “look at that yuma!”

Ronny explains how the Habaneras distinguish themselves from their provincial sisters. A chica from Santa Clara or Holguin for instance will come to Havana in the hope of making some money while the Habanera has a more sophisticated approach. She will seek to make \$30 at La Rampa, give \$10 to her husband and take \$10 to La Maison or some other high end restaurant, spend \$2 - \$4 on a drink or two. \$4 down, some foreigner will come along and invite her to another and likely pay \$50 for a trick. This is how the Habanera becomes a puta de nivel, unlike her provincial sisters, who will always stay on the same level.

I ask Raffa, who would know, why he thinks the generally incessant cigar hustle seems to have subsided or is at a noticeable low. “Everything’s been sold,” he guarantees. The usual steal-able quantity of puros and other convertible goods is not as freely available as last year. The quantity of paladares and casas particulares appears scaled down as well. Is the State really so intent on sucking every available tourist dollar directly into its registers, without the detour of semi-private participation?

Ronnie changes the subject. 98 out of 100 cops in Havana are not Habaneros he correctly points out. In his opinion there isn’t a Habanero sufficiently uncultured to seek out such a low-end job. The Palestinos, as those citizens migrating from the eastern parts of the island are called, seem to find some confirmation of ego in this relatively well paid assignment. Ronnie thinks these cops are too stupid to be dangerous, were it not for the fact that they carry guns. Naturally the State takes advantage of such willing, programmable species and decorates them with spiffy uniforms and walkie-talkies. A cop is paid twice the State salary of a doctor, which in itself is still as miserable as in most Latin American countries, law enforcement is an entrepreneurial activity, corruption is quickly learned as subsidy or survival tool.

Take into account, that before the USSR subsidy evaporated, in Cuba the US dollar was at par with the Peso. So a paycheque of \$120 pesos did pay the bills, then. At the time of this writing, the Peso sells at 27:1. The State continues to pay the same wages, or less, yet the low value of money makes comfortable living impossible for many.

Above all and as everywhere, family is at the center of everything. Laborers can not entirely rely on the money economy, especially not when so poorly paid. The family is the only norm for even minimal security. Yet family in itself has an ambiguous character; it provides safety amidst ups and downs, while at the same time it can be another instrument of repression and dependence. This is true all over the world, even in the industrialized nations, especially so for women. The Machine destroys family traditions and exploits them at the same time.

The family yields a lot of unpaid work and produces cheap labour for unstable jobs. In the developing countries, labourers find themselves in an enervating situation. They’re called upon to give up their old family traditions or villages, but the New can’t give them a sufficient means of survival. So they come to the cities and end up in slums, agglomerations of despair, that do not, as such, exist in Cuba, given the standards of Rio, Caracas and Mexico City. They hear of new consumer goods, but can’t earn enough to buy them. Simultaneously their villages and agricultural bases decay. Basic freedom is at the same time a burden, for each day means an entirely new challenge.

Life is never safe, food has become uncertain, and risks are always high. Criminal bands and quick profiteers exploit this fact and easily recruit pushers, hustlers and mercenaries. In Cuba, all the above are embodied by representatives of the State.

Ronnie points at a broken toilet bowl abandoned on the street corner. He says in Santa Clara a few steps from the Plaza del Che, this bowl still brings 200 pesos. This broken bowl I ask? Yes, as you see it he confirmed. We passed a store on Infanta, not far from Havana University. The modest signage touts “La Moda” of the day. Inside, dresses of any style, colour and size sold for \$2 to \$4. They are not exactly my style nor anywhere near what I’d call fashion, but look good overall. Ronnie explained that these clothes are gifts from foreign countries, governments and companies. He says, the State gets them for free and sells them to its citizens. I speculate that the relative minimal cost of these clothes covers shipping and handling. Ronnie disagrees. If they are a present from some country, the State should be giving them to its citizens at no cost.

Before the industrial work machine colonized the actual third world, there was “poverty.” Poverty meant that people possessed few material goods and had no money, though they had enough to eat and everything they needed for their way of life was available. Wealth was originally “software.” Wealth was not determined by things and quantities, but by forms: myths, festivals, fairy tales, manners, eroticism, language, music, dance, theater, etc.

The work machine has destroyed most of the wealth aspects of this poverty and left misery in its place. When the money economy hits poverty, the result is the development of misery, or maybe just “development.”

Whether private or State capital, the result is always the same; loss of local food resources, black-mailing on the world market, repression, civil wars among rival ruling cliques, military dictatorship, intervention by a superpower, dependence, torture, massacres, deportation, disappearance, famine. Their common central element is violence, demoralized and disillusioned masses.

I ask Ronnie and Raffa over a few beers what really distinguishes Cuba from the rest of the world. They are both quick to point out the obvious: absence of drugs and violent crime, free and thorough education for everyone, the right to health and housing. But now I want to know about race (*2) aside from the obvious tourist apartheid. Ronnie is as black as nature offers it. He is articulate, well mannered and except when a pretty chica passes by, focused and interested. His good education did not allow him a career. He says, he was among the three most qualified graduates in his class, yet was not presented with a step up on the ladder which he attributes to his skin colour, sliding his index finger up and down his left arm. I agree, that the upper classes of Cuba, as in the United States are hardly afro-saturated, but considering that Cuba only carries a 15 percent black population, would we not find this percentage across the State job roster?

Behind us, in the cafeteria on the noisy Malecon, he points out that only one out of six employees is black. A coincidental 15 percent share. At the Havana Libre, the bar personnel are white. the concierge is white, the rental car agents are white, the Internet access office manager is white, the door security is black. The convenience store has two employees, one white, one black. White referring to mestizo.

Raffa is a creamy chocolate colored mulato javao. His life appears good, he defends Fidel and La Revolucion with a passion. He too came from Santiago de Cuba out east, he too was once a Palestino, he has had the fortune to create a comfortable existence. He's made connections, not through his family, but directly through his personal skills, despite his skin tone. He considers himself a third world citizen and a drop in the ocean, but has dreams if not ambitions: he wants to learn AutoCad and design his own house some day.

Carlos, of 81 years, is smoking a cigar on the Malecon at sunset. For him the time prior to '59 was better. He had a store then. Fidel gave him 900 pesos and disowned him. He has been struggling ever since, until this very day. His four dollar pension and the strategic cookie sales get him by. Just about. He does not have any family, neither here nor there. No subsidy or other help. I won't see this mierda changing in my lifetime, he assures me. And if it were to change tomorrow , what's the difference? My life is spent.

Laura is married , has two children, seven and eleven. She has not been able to afford photos of her daughter since the age of two. They live in a humble apartment, crudely painted, an old TV set, hard to tell if it's colour or black and white. If Grandma would not be such an egotist, life might be better. The other day Grandma bought a personal pizza and would not share a piece with her grandkids. Laura cannot get enough money together to finish a small upstairs room that she could rent out. It remains a dream project. She points out that she had never in her younger years considered prostitution. She said her belief in God helps her get through life. Had she been able to visit her family back in Camaguey? No, and why, they're all at odds anyhow. She holds her fist at her temple, demonstrating how stubborn people in the provinces are. It's frustrating, she laments, they simply do not want to be agreeable.

Outside the street is in candela. There are over 200 people crowded around a domestic dispute in progress, unsuccessfully being mediated by two cops, their patrol car parked ahead. The husband is being beaten by a group of girls and yelled at by his wife. I get the impression that for most bystanders this is as passive as is television, their arms crossed rarely commenting about him or her. The only time I've seen crowds emotionally involved was at baseball games otherwise the condition of not being permitted an opinion, at least in public, seems to result in unanimated gazing bystanders. Neither cheering nor mocking or booing. Some soft smiles, pity, ridicule, expressions of embarrassment at the temperamental confrontation among the inner circle of the conflict. By now the daughters and cousins have shredded Dad's shirt while trying to pull the



BYE BYE HAVANA - Utopia is behind us

truncheon from the cop's belt or to grab any object with which to hit old dad. A guy next to me wants to know if I took a picture.

Todo Es Ilegal

Everyone here agrees on one thing: the moment you leave your dwelling, be that a barren room at the end of a dark corridor or a spacious apartment in a former villa, everything's illicit. This is where the everlasting process of negotiation begins. What's taxes in the Western world amount to multas on this island. There is a fine for everything, and of course, offices administrating their collection and enforcement. I witness how Havana cops, who through long sweaty days and endless nights, let discipline unravel and boredom set in so they can experience a rush in exercising power over those with no recourse. A 150 peso fine for an ID card in poor shape, for a citizen with a 148 peso monthly paycheque compares to a \$3,500 USD fine for the average American. Cuban ID cards, or carnet, are so poorly manufactured, they could never withstand the incessant requests at these ambulant checkpoint charlie's. Marta was fined for cleaning the sidewalk in front of her rental apartment, after a big dog had left a deposit. She is allowed street cleaning only on certain days. A couple who were separating, decided to build a wall smack through the middle of their apartment, they were both fined for mixing concrete in the street 50 feet from a State construction site. Any unauthorized activity, which aside from sex in the privacy in your own home, is just about everything, may result in a fine. Offenses, such as the expression of opinion in public, unless related to baseball, may result in reprimand or steep fines. I ask what these ubiquitous and frequent mesas redondas represent? Those community roundtables in every neighbourhood. Apparently, mere instruments of State communications from the top down. Discussion outside the box is too dangerous, as my episode with the opinionated onion seller illustrates.

Even Raffa, who is rather liberal privately, wants me to know that he does not approve of Ronnie speaking his mind the other night. He is concerned that Ronnie said a lot of things that should not be said especially not when I am recording it. He also cautions me of any particular friendship with Ronnie, a guy who reads materials provided by the "Miami Mafia" of exiles.

Strolling up Prado again tonight, biting through the increasing humidity, I happen to pass the cafeteria where a couple of days ago this guy did the nude demo. Whether loco or hungry, both or neither, I approach the elegantly dressed gatekeepers and ask why in this Socialist country, where equality and brotherhood are extra capitalized, no one saw the need to attend to this man, give him a glass of water or a piece of bread. "Oh no! He's just a loco guy", they unanimously insist. OK, so even if he's just a loco, why would society or the State let it come to this extreme manifestation? "He just forgot to take his pills, you know, he's been treated, released and so forth". Does he not have family, -- Oh yes-- and does this not mean some sort of support? My three gatekeepers shrug and assure me that he's not worth the worry. I tell them that I was a bit

ashamed not to have taken the heart to offer this man some help when this spectacle occurred. But that I felt this kind of intervention did not correspond to me as a foreigner walking around with camera equipment. One of the guys closes with: "You have been listened to."

It is true that in moments of crisis, some good friends are more important than our social security card or savings account. The State provides but fake security. This is a given in Cuba, as in Canada, in Korea as in any kingdom.

There is not an ounce of difference between capitalism, socialism or any other ism. They all converge in a more, or often less, successful model of hunger-management. If we truly want a better deal we need to forget trying to stop the machine with magic like oriental religions or illusions of secret power.

We need to stop taking to the streets and sit down at our respective kitchen tables. First we need to refuse immunisation against reality, and turn off the TV. We need to make time ours. Our life has been standardized, rationalized, anonymized. They track down and steal from us every unoccupied second, every unused squared foot; they offer us, some of us, quick vacations in exotic places but in our everyday lives our manoeuvring room gets smaller and smaller.

Passivity, isolation, inertia, emptiness, these are not cured by new electronics in the living room, frenzied travel, meditation workshops, creativity courses, zipless fucks, pyramid power or drugs. Our deal is poisoned; it's revenge comes in the form of depression, cancer, allergies, addictions, anxieties and suicide. Under the perfect make-up, behind the façade of the "affluent society," they are only new forms of human misery.

What makes up a good deal? Filet Mignon, Sushi, HDTV, Surfing in Costa Rica, hundred dollar champagne, Feng Shui, Cancun, Naomi Campbell, Coke, Mauna Kea, Mercedes S-class, an exclusive golf membership? Is this the machine's best offer? But what about those mornings while commuting? That sudden rush of angst, disgust, despair. We try not to face that ominous void, but in unoccupied moments between career and consumption, -while we are waiting - we realize that time is not ours. The Machine is duly afraid of those moments, and so are we. We are always kept under tension, busy, looking forward to something. Hope itself keeps us in line. In the morning we think of the weekend. We sustain everyday life by planning the future or the next vacation. In this way, we are immunized against reality, numbed against the loss of our energies. We are always somewhere else.

"If we'd rely on the State, we'd all starve to death." Canasta basica rations are irrational. Maybe good for 10 or 12 days. If you were to buy a loaf of white bread each day, you'd be out \$12 US in a month, three to four times the pension of the average retiree, or the equivalent pay of an engineer or journalist. I am flanked by several student-types offering to help eat my quarter

chicken, as I take a bite and put my drumstick back on my plate, one bystander anxiously wonders, “Wow, you’re going to leave all this?” I shake my head, no chico, I am chewing.

He does not understand what I am up to. After I agree to invite him to a personal Cuban style pizza, thick and chewy, he won’t put it down, not even for a second. What would have been ten to fifteen bites for the average eater, he manages to fold two times and devour in four bites, with vigorous precision.

“Let me put it this way,” Leo begins: “in Havana nobody works and everyone lives one way or another. The streets may be full of dog shit, but stepping into it should be considered good luck.” We are sitting in his tiny living room on Gervasio, with two cops, his mom and the occasional drop-in. He tells me “not to be afraid” of the cops. They are his friends. We shake hands and have a zip of rum. In Havana, everything is illegal, yet everyone works everything out, Leo assures me. You may have to stand in line for the seven eggs Fidel gives you as part of the canasta basica, but meanwhile you are chatting your heart out. The guy living across the street is chief of police of a near by district, he would never bother me or tell me to do this or don’t do that. The guy living above me is a military something. Never had a run in of any kind. In Havana people talk a lot of shit, shit, shit, shit. People complain, whine and bitch, but in the end everything is cool. Of course there are a bunch of things that could be better, but Leo rationalizes, that this will surely apply to every place on earth. The cops agree. They are part of the 20,000 strong city police contingent.

I verify what Ronny mentioned, that most cops are from the provinces, they agree 100 percent. One is from Camaguey, the other from Guantanamo. At home they will make 100 pesos per month and struggle for a new pair of shoes. Here, since no Habanero would consider being a cop, they get paid 800 pesos. Twice as much as a doctor, wear a clean uniform and a pair of new boots and have a “good job”. Down the street, outside an administrative building I confront a group of men about these “round table meetings.” The mesa redonda exists so “those above tell us about the world.” They have the antennas and satellite dishes and tell us about the dangers of life in the imperialist countries. We really have nothing to say at those meetings, except when a street light needs fixing, stuff like that.

We attend but listen with our minds on another frequency. A clean cut guy in his late thirties tells me that we in the West have the right to demonstrate against stuff like the war in Iraq, for example. I agree, but point out that no one really listens. I propose that they the Cubanos could stand in the street and hold a sign up “Fidel, we want more chicken”. They all laugh. “No, man, we’d eat stale bread behind bars,” one guy winks. OK, but how many people can the boss put in prison? 100, 1000, 10,000? At one point you will win, whatever your cause. My suggestion elicits no response.

Ingrid is an attractive 40 year old in sandals, a teacher from Dortmund, Germany's industrial north, no kids, never been married, comes to Havana, meets Lazaro, a 28 year old black trombone player. She laments that German men are cold, never sensuous. Lazaro gives her the love and affection she yearns for. While having a beer with Lazaro and two of his friends he tells me about his Spanish bride, the Argentinan cutie and the Mexican lady, who he all loves. But Ingrid is his favourite. I explain to him, while Cuban men may dominate their women on the dance floor and or in life, a potential long term relationship would not allow such inequity. He says he thought about that, that Ingrid has her own resources and ideas. In any event he is not interested in leaving Cuba, but if one of his loves would move here, he'd be her man.

Today's head lines in the USA, Canada, UK, you name it, "Britney Spears suffers knee injury, Paris Hilton thrown from horse, Escaped gorilla terrifies zoo goers, Whitney Houston into rehab".

Every beggar has his or her pitch. Juan wears a base-ball cap under his sombrero and imitates guajiros with city slickness. Antonio has no arms, just a small hand grown from one shoulder, "Que? you are not a fucking tourist, what are you then, just a tourist?" One dollar, pinga! The guajira with walrus fangs and her dehydrated five year old, who desperately tries to wrestle water bottles from passing tourists, who smilingly would not consider sharing a drop of water with this child, the dopey youth hawking commie news papers, the ancient looking couple doing a death bed tango on the side walk, the Mr. T-type gold chain chulo, instructing newbee whores to latch onto this one or that one.

Iga, the feisty old lady, who wants a quarter each day I see her, "nothing for me today?" she laughs, tongue in cheek, knowing so well of her highly targeted begging skills. Che smoking, Police operation, sorry, you can't film that. 20 youths on a truck, Pingueros, drugs? Too rebellious to be rebel youth. What country? amigo! Salam a Leikum. Wanna have sex? Cheap, come on! Getting married riding high in a convertible Chevrolet, honking, hawking, hooking, soot. How are you, sir? Some rum? Viagra? 44 Spaniards in a luxury bus, stealing glimpses of well-oiled poverty.

Ute got herself a rastaman. She smokes and sighs in lower German. Viva la Habana y su Malecon and some good lovin'. One dollar! Pssst, ven aca, got a light? Taxi? Do you guys know more than one word, "no, why? we're taxistas!" Che smiling, soot, no napkings, no toilet paper, musica romantica. Hey marry me! Coco taxi? No one wants to talk about "him". This can't go on, candela! 5 peso pizza, mothers conspiring with their daughters, help me survive, take a Mercedes taxi to Miramar. Mitsubishi is working for a better future. Cohiba, four thousand lung cancer deaths last year, undramatic. Lesbian youths smoke more than gay pensioners. Germany? Canada? Italia? My friend, casa particular? Mister, sorry, no Cubans allowed. Raffa rationalizes Guillen, "I don't care if they don't let me in there, what would I do if they did? I can't afford that place, not even a beer. Oiste?!"

I don't want to be a millionaire! T-shirts that disclose your GUCCI ENVY, spectator democracy, Tommy Bowfinger, Calvin Swine, censored apparel, 2 dollar sun glasses, gafas look good, yesterday's propaganda, Mexican got busted laundering money, at least he was working. Same old song cha-cha, soot. Siempre, new white people, frescos, putas shake hands with the security guy, a seven year old with tattoo, chulito, black man, white bride, happy mix, bathroom for yumas only, ven a mi Cuba y baila cha-cha-cha, one dollar ayudame, pinga! my friend, those sun glasses cost 250 dollars. Anorexia without neurosis, she is a hottie, look at those elbows, thirty year mortgage anyone? Sixty Denzel Washington look-alikes, yes, yes, classic Che poster in the ice cream parlor, speeken English?

Taxi? where' you from? more silly white people getting off a bus, more Swiss, Swedish, Swazi, swatch this. Inhale leaded gas at 3 dollars per gallon, add some rum? There is hunchback grandma again: "nothing for me today?" black Mercedes, Jose Marti, Adidas, Calvin, Che, Viva, all the exclamation marks you can handle! What's the meaning of life? Pinga! Quieres cola? no toilet paper anywhere, use the phonebook loco, one dollar, soot, sexy, soot, ninety nine fahrenheit, don't worry! ten thousand gallons of rum ahead, bring a canister! Transvestites are humans too, taxi! Kunta Kinte look alike, computer lessons, bread 2 pesos, ice cream for 5, ding-dong what's your name? amigo, ven aca! fuck this guy, charge him 20 dollars!! el cheapo Americano squeezes the quarter so hard, makes the eagle scream. Algo pa'comer?!

Fat chica, Daihatsu, Samsung, Kalisnikova, this princess wants an ashtray. Here's to looking at you, man! Zero qualifications, watching chica's ass, shake a maraca, is that worth more than Fidel pays you? Con~o, I'd be doing something else if I were paid well, - bullshit. Six eggs and a bi-weekly chicken, mira! red-haired triguen~as, manguitos, croquetas de pollo, bocadito de cerdo, guagua, 244 people on a single bus. Dog shit in the lobby, nice to meet you, sex now? you've got no rhythm, white girl, take my picture don't be an idiot, it's my money! Achtung, super cool idiot, one dollar, mami, suave, rico, Hemingway is dead, canto el llano carajo! te quiero, lonely planet, where to next? North Korea? Burma? soot, soot, kiss, kiss, tete-a-tete, spit here, take a piss. hola! my friend, llegaste tarde, no napkins, use the table cloth, ding-dong your identity card, por favor, thank you. Un bocadito y una patada al jamon, how many more tears?Hasta cuando? Baila bonito, piropos for everyone.

In her modest dwelling, "look at this", Carmen shows me a few pictures. "This guy is a Mexican from Guadalajara, he says he loves me even though he knows I have a husband. And look at this one, same case." This time he is Spaniard, a picture shows a fiftyish man standing on a snowy road in front of a SEAT. Carmen is between amused and perplexed. What's with these guys? Her husband remains indifferent, "every human being deserves respect". Even a guy who lusts after your wife? I ask. Sure, they are men just like me. But that does not mean I'd let them go to bed with her, eh! OK, but you are allowing them to indulge in the illusion. He laughs, one dollar!

Carmen is 36, pregnant and as much as she feels her artistic talents might have deserved more lime light, she is somewhat comfortably settled in her status-quo with a good zip of rum, naturally. Her 11 year old watching the ball game, her husband and his friends giggling at my comments on socialismo o muerte, and why in some cases the latter is preferable. Carmen chuckles into her glass. This is not about love, let's get that straight, pointing to her puffy belly, as if I should hear it grumble.

How many dollars can I dispense, how many peanuts, trinkets, plastic flowers, one dollar watches, ding-dong, viste? Any dog in the streets of Havana knows, no car will run him over. Accidents, even fender benders are extraordinarily rare. In this city of 3.5 million. Gentle honking is only a courtesy to caution others. Every one is present minded, awake and aware. Traffic flows smoothly. There is no devil to modify one's behaviour. No sin. Just reason, or the lack of.

Stuck on a train in an endless sugarcane field after midnight, I hear this joke: Guy standing on a beach, little boat passes by, captain shouting, vamos, vamos!! guy on beach says, no thanks I believe in God he'll save me. Next month another lancha passes by, captain shouting to the guy on the beach Coño, vamos, vamos!! no thanks the guy on the beach says, I believe in God, he'll save me. Forty years later the guy goes to heaven and asks God, "Oye Dios," I prayed my whole life because you said you'd save me, what happened?. Says God, "Chico, yo te mande dos lanchas!" Man, I sent you two boats, what else could I have done?

A beer with Osama at 3 A.M. "I have no interest other than to promote my cause" Osama is from Western Sahara, a sandy spit of one million ethnically diverse people, glued to Morocco. He studies economics at the Politecnico in Camaguey, eight hours east of Havana, as long as your train does not break down, which it seems to do on schedule. "The crown always protects the crown," Osama laments. Therefore one can't expect powerful Arab countries to support the cause of sandy spits like Sahara, a former Spanish colony. Osama has learned Cuban street speak with a talent. He explains how his parents back home know nothing about his beer drinking and girl chasing, which he considers research funded by Fidel. Cuba offers extensive academic and medical support to countries like his. He is on a stipend, only had to pay his airfare.

So what's your cause, I asked Osama. Independence, he asserts. Will you return to your parental patch upon graduation? yes, at least temporarily, the world is great, as is God, as is his desire to manoeuvre about on an island where jevas give discounts to students.

Camaguey is a pulsating provincial city under 300,000. Twenty three parks and plazas. Commerce and communism have converged to create a vibrant, wrinkle-free model of what it could be like, if only every place were like Camaguey. Regardless, the hustle does not end here. Where am I from, what am I looking for, one dollar, ding-dong, oiste. Underneath this pleasant veneer, life is de pinga for the same social elements as in Havana. The Bronze Worker just can't seem to

figure out how to get the goods he sees, wants, needs. Police presence here is relative minimal and not intrusive. Maybe more un-uniformed vigilance, I can't tell. Celebrating its 490th anniversary, "Camaguey loves you and embraces you" the sign at Solidarity Plaza reads. "What are you writing?" a man asks, "the history of this church?" Are you kidding? "Ah, in that case, God bless you", he disappears.

You can be as poor in the United States as in Brazil, or as rich in India as in Switzerland. Out there, there are no more national economies. Just multi national companies operating all over the planet, wherever profits can be made the easiest. The New World Order is simply the predator's dream of an unlimited hunting ground. Wars are operations for the world economy as such. The U.S. army is hired to do the job, a new type of planetary Pinkertons. Why wait for the next job? Why not use our creative potentials ourselves? Must the East really wait for economic help from the West? Can't farmers and city dwellers just organize and create self-sufficient country or city communities? Can't Premium, Gold, Silver and Bronze workers communicate across their deal-barriers? No "ruling" is needed to be in power. A famous ad-campaign urges us to "think different." Why won't we?

A long time ago when I was 17, Trinidad, now 20 confides, my novio and I used to make love 10 times a day. She wants to embrace me. I smile and to the roar of the traffic tell her how I am not a foreigner with disposable dollars searching for young women with charms. How old Havana's street characters with their insulting vulgarity and desperate aggressiveness upset me. And how I would like to assemble an impression of her life in the face of the shifting minutes. She says silence will be more sensible. Please forgive my egotism, as I continue writing. Havana is a place that both attracts and demolishes me. My ears burn with the heat. Trinidad, with a pencil fills in her eyebrows creating a provocative angle, pointing in sustained astonishment. Have you been with many chicas, she wants to know. Do I prefer mulatas or negras or trigueñas like her? Did I colour my hair? Sure you did, she insists. It's impossible to get a good tint here, it washes right out. Entonces, the other day in the tub, she says there was blood all around her. She freaked out until she realized that the tint of her hair was washing off, like a scene out of Hitchcock.

She adores blue eyes. It's always been her colour. Nothing annoys her as much as an unexpected bead of sweat, pitilessly marking the make up she takes such pains to perfect. The night is an eternal promise. Deciding where to go is always difficult. She does not know why she has a premonition that today would be special. She says some nights she feels a terrible depression, that something is going to happen and the worst of it. Afterwards, the loneliness of an unshared bed. She's met fabulous people, but it's difficult to find someone with class among the turistas these days. Vedado or the historic quarter? You need a sharp nose and to know where to direct your shots, how to avoid a scandalous failure. She has learned those lessons. I asked how she manages to avoid the chulos. She's evaluating me. My grandma is my chula. I do everything for

her, she raised me, not my mother, a first grade teacher, who taught her the pain of premature abandonment. The best pick ups are made around eleven. She operates on her senses and imagines how it might all turn out. God damn, how she wants to take me home. Central Park is full of single women, men and incessant hustlers, ready for anything for the magic dollars, capable of transforming them into gleaming Nike characters with expensive Levis and a thousand bottles of 7 años rum.

Pensioners and police, trinket vendors, students still in uniform, one dollar, oiste! Someone here could be the person she is waiting for. There is no reason to be impatient. She eliminates those accompanied, those who look rough and the Habaneros in general. She evaluates the rest, one by one. Ding-dong, your identity card please! Three Italians. A couple kissing unreservedly, it kills her with jealousy. Her mind is a whirlwind of envy, love, memories, nostalgia and the abandoned, reawakened hatred for her mother. She feels empty at the same time burdened with lust, hate, desperation. It pains her to know that they are happy people. Two couples, three girls, cheap looking, a massive black guy who casts inviting glances at her, two youths, a cop with a German shepard. Here and there the stench of dried urine assails her nostrils. The urge to vomit, waiting for the miracle of love.

Concordia Street is seething, viva, viva, all the exclamation marks you can handle. Kids competing, my daddy has a Lada, and hey, mine has a bicycle and mine has a horse, and hey, the Lada runs faster than the horse and a bicycle, even a mountain bike, but the horse clipperty cloppety crushes the Lada and the bicycle. Hey, my mother is a saint, I'll swap her for a washing machine. Lines at the milk store, concrete mixers, dos gardenias, one for you, one for the government. That Russian truck got no oil, your identity card please, ding-dong, Ice cream, bring your own cone, discourse on health and education, pinga!

"When I was a kid, people thought I was shy, because I would not join the party. I would sit on a chair, legs together, hands in my lap and watch the event. That's funny, because I could dance well and everything. But you know what, they forgot to give me a shot of rum." Nene is a violinist, lives on the beach at La Boca on the Bahamas Channel, twenty minutes from the tourist resort of Santa Lucia, two hours from Camaguey. When Victor Hugo referred to his preference for intellectual hell over stupid paradise, he had not been to La Boca, a socialist fantasy gazing at the infinite curvature of the horizon. A cluster of huts along the tropical, coco palm-lined beach. A couple of state run eateries, no church, no cops, no commerce. Tourists come here in taxis or rental cars from near by resorts. They provide the illegal cash economy for the 77 locals.

Nene is picked up every other day or so by a guitar player to perform in a restaurant in Santa Lucia. Tips feed them. Nene's puro is a retired military figure. He rejects Nene's life style of not working for the State. "Fidel made a bad investment with me," Nene says. Ample education, classical violin training since he was 6, and screw it, they are not getting paid back. Yet he would never contemplate leaving his country. "How much would a place like mine cost in Florida," he asks. Discounting the simplicity of his dwelling, four hundred thousand bucks and up, I speculate. And does the State of Florida pay for breakfast? We laugh. Mariquita, illegally of course, rents me a room in her wooden house.

A mattress, that would be a hit with fakirs and self-flagellants. Outside my window an illegal piglet I name Oscar de la Renta, ding-dong dignity, no ID card required here. Her old dad loves his prehistoric Atari. Her brother asks her for two dollars so he can get his shoes fixed. Surf pounding 20 feet from the porch. As remote as La Boca may be, and as with every place in Cuba, there is electricity and running water. The neighbour also has a TV. The 1 o'clock news, similar to yesterday's, identical to the morning and evening broadcasts. State employed journalists explaining the Imperial enemy to the popular collective. Talk about good news, we bought a few more Volvo busses to shuttle more yuma. Productivity of our comrades in this and that industrial combinado is above expectation, way to go! viva, exclamation marks. National baseball semi final, Villa Clara vs. Industrial. Someone is trying to help himself to a coco in front of Mariquitas cottage, "hey, stop it", she warns. Around the bay, more day tourists are being unloaded.

Riding with Carlito in his Russian made dump truck over pot holes connecting to form a dirt road between the beach and lagoon, hundreds of flamingos waiting for a recount. "You have no idea how many times cops stop me between here and Camaguey, coño!" The other day I had a load of 4000 bricks and my luck was that as I was stopped, there was a truck with hamburger meat behind me, so the cops opted for that. Minimum 10 pesos every time. Sometime ago, Mola, the cop from Vertientes, you know him? He stops me on the road to Las Tunas, by the glorieta, you know, he says "chico, we are partners, eh?" He wanted 200 bricks right off the truck.

I worked it out so that I brought him small loads of 50 to his house every so often. Mariquita's piglet is also going to be expensive. Once it's big and fat, the inspectors and self-aligned coconspirators will appear for a bite, bringing along their families and friends, and there goes the piglet. It's a form of impromptu colloquial taxation. A guy who works the State's 24 hour restaurant, known as Dracula, for the black rings under his bulging eyes, sells illegal lobster plates for 12 dollars to tourists, off the menu, in place of the State's provisioned 5 dollar fish filet. So his 100 peso monthly pay increases by a supportable subsidy, the eternal and essential, predictably illegal, clandestine exercise of survival. Carlito's truck rocks with Cubanito hits, a beer in his left hand and the non-powered steering wheel in the other. He tells me about his 15 year old novia, Milady. How he, like "all" Cubans prefer their women as faceless bodies, with solely

epidermal responses, house clean, feet nicely done, food served. He explains how you gotta bite and scratch her, abduct her, make her your slave, your whore, your servant, so she abandons her family, her respect, her friends, her beliefs, all for that instant of madness, fuego!

Carlito is 30, buys bricks at 2.70 and sells them 2-3 hours down the road for 4 - 4.50. Diesel is usually free, as the State covers that for the official jobs he holds. "No one on earth loves to party like we Cubans. If there are four to five of us, we organize a pig, for maybe 40 fula between us and throw a fiesta. Someone brings rum, beer, you can imagine. And you know what, in Cuba even the 90 year olds dance like there is no tomorrow. When you stop dancing, you die."

Cuba's life expectancy of 76.6 years is one of Latin America's highest, and just below that of the United States, which is 77.4 years. (*3)

But of course, socialism doesn't only mean frustration. It does have real advantages. It's productivity is low, because it's workers exert a generous level of control over working rhythms, conditions and quality standards. There is no risk of unemployment and firing is difficult. People can take it relatively easy. In La Havana, capitol of the non-incentive, where "no one works" and service is extraordinarily poor, yet somehow everyone makes a living.

A guy at a clandestine restaurant serving me goat stew for 50 cents a plate, tells me, that his girl is in Mallorca and he is assigned to Angola next week, with an 8 hour layover at Madrid's Barajas Airport. He wants to know, if he'll be able to leave the airport during that time. If so, he's got a contact in Spain, who will pick him up and he'd ask for asylum. I agree that Mallorca will certainly be more fun than Angola. I wish him luck and suggest that he leave a note, "bye bye Fidel" in his abandoned luggage.

Speaking with the board of directors for the protection of the consumer in the hotel Colon in Camaguey, I find the ubiquitous non- challenge of people who's only purpose in life is pay day. I offered to correct the exaggeratedly ridiculous English printed on the consumer protection advisory, and the Director personally declines. I ask that my rights be respected that I be given the goods and services I have purchased, he could care less. I ask why it is that they make such an effort to proclaim consumer rights, when indeed they do neither protect nor deliver remedy. He does not have an answer. I stated that this kind of behaviour undoes la revolucion a mile a minute, one step forward 957 steps back. He remains silent. I request an opinion, a commentary, something! I ask if they will be shot if they have an opinion. "Shot no", the guy at the door says, "kicked out of here, yes." Cuba takes the prize when it comes to baaad service, that in Western countries still remains beyond one's imagination. Nevertheless endless supplies of tourists hop off the bus, snap a few shots of the musical trio greeting them with an oily Guantanamo, and head straight to the bar, where mojitos and daiquiris want to be slurped at New York city prices. Count your change, chico!

Back in Havana, ding-dong, come over here, daily rebelde, know the truth! your revolution sucks! Ok, so imperial terrorism sucks, too. Bad Yankee, good Cubano, shut up! Leaded gas, guy in wheel chair tagged by bus, black and white, Chinese turistas, hee, hee, take my picture quick before they slit their wrist with a CD. Chulos, 54 Buick, mani for a peso, ayudame! one dollar! only back for an hour and I am already worn out.

In front of the unattractive bus station a scrubby little black dog looks at me in sad English. “My friend”, he stares, “haven’t had a meal in days”. It’s midnight. I tell him, if he watches my baggage, I’ll get him a sausage sandwich. He agrees. I name him Bicho. As I return from across the street, I offer him the greasy bread first so he can fill up and enjoy his Spanish sausage more leisurely. He prefers it the other way around.

Ay Bicho, you’re just like everyone else around here. Party, party, party, and too good for a piece of bread, oiste! Next, you’re gonna want a cell phone and expensive shampoo, that makes your coat so silky. And then a trip to the Bahamas for a pizza, eh? And a private yacht with dozens of super mascotas, a villa in the Hamptons and one in Bel Air. Have you called your broker today? Bicho knows that he’s doomed and that I won’t be back.

Juana has been working at the bus station as baggage processor for 26 years now. She is seven months from retirement, her four dollar monthly pay will then reduce to \$2.40. She says tips are optional, unlike in other countries as she’s heard. Tip or no tip, she’ll offer the same smile. It’s midnight, she’s got 6 hours to go, filling out baggage claim tickets, as well as lifting suitcases of any size and weight onto a cart, hauling it to a waiting bus and sometimes getting a fond hug and kiss from chauffeurs, dressed up like airline captains. I offer her a cup of good rum. She tells me how her life before 1992 was so much better. There was little tourism then, but even her pay was higher and she perceived less pressure. Now, and since the collapse of the Soviet subsidy, we’ve been in the periodo especial ever since.

What’s “special” about any of this, I ask. She smiles attune to my sarcasm. Juana lives with her grown daughter. Both sell little goods here and there to make ends meet. Gotta struggle. Some days her struggle pays off, some days it does not. It would be easier with a man around the house. But Juana is cheerful nonetheless. The other day, she went to see a Santero Yumuri to ask her spiritual advisor for more strength. She feels the suitcases and boxes have become too heavy for her, but with just seven months to go, she’s not one to complain. I pour her another cup of the good rum, another bus, another load of suitcases, the size of caskets. She wants me to stick around but not let anyone into her office, as she pulls out to load the next coach.

She says I talk like an Italian, almost like a Cubano but not quite. Would I like to meet her daughter when I return? She almost had an inheritance from a relative abroad, but it did not work out. 300 dollars per month would mean life in heaven here. But how to accomplish this?

You need family abroad who send you something. She says, at 52 she is no longer in the position to market herself, you know, too old and too worked over. I pour her another cup of the good rum and tell her she's attractive. She thinks I am just being kind and drinks up, flattered.

"Progress" always means working more and more and the ever more murderous conditions. From 1440 hours per year in 1300, work rose to 3,600 hours in 1850, in 1987 it was 2152. We continue to keep falling for strong illusions of "a better future". After all, if the present is so miserable, the future must be better. To no surprise, regulated working time is the central show piece for the utopian planner. Thomas More in 1516 guarantees a 6 hours day. Callenbach a 20 hour a week. Andre Gorz (*4) (*les chemins du paradis-L'agonie du Capital*, 1983) proposes a 20,000 hour work life. After Marshall Sahlin's research on Stone Age Economics (1972) the two or three hour day is about to win the race. Ironically it turns out, that the U.S. standard of living of 1948 could today be reproduced in four hours per day. Utopia is Behind us.

It is the respective cultural context that defines what is considered "work" (= pain) and what is perceived as "leisure" (= pleasure), or if such distinction makes any sense at all. Cooking can be a very important ritual for some, a passion, while for others it is a tedious necessity. Maybe music is more important to me, while you would consider it noise. No one can know the advantage of a 70 hour work week to that of a 15 hour week. Let's abandon the obligatory life-style, abolish the general budget of work and leisure, and adopt a more or less free flow of passions, perversions, aberrations, introduce mutual self-help, abandon the logic of the "lesser evil". We can build our own circuits of survival, off the grid. Think different, act different. In spite of some vulgar Marxist conceptions "culture" is more important than "material survival", and the hierarchy of basic or other needs is not as obvious as it may seem. Food is not just calories, cooking styles are essential, houses aren't just shelters, clothes are much more than body insulation. There is no reason why anyone should be puzzled if people who are about to starve struggle for their dignity, their language identity and other "super structural fancies", including religion, before they demand a guaranteed minimal wage.

Looking at global suicide rates, those killing themselves are mostly young people. These suicides are not just due to their pure misery, but demoralization and lack of perspective. Paradise has been destroyed long before the arrival of Fulgencio Batista. In the case of Cuba, it is certainly wrong to look for cultural identities exclusively in ethnic traditions. While in the industrialized Western world the invention of cultural identities has been commercialized in the forms of fashion, clubs, cults, waves and styles, this spreading of seemingly infinite varieties of groups, cults and memberships, shows that a lot of Yankees feel the need for a life governed by a well-defined ideological background. The desire that is perverted in these associations is the one of unity of ideas and life, a new age totalitarianism. "ora et labora".

The 20th. Century was borne under the sign of revolution, and has died marked by despair.

After having been disappointed by the material riches of the industrial societies, a lot of people have turned to cultural wealth. (Software) Two generations of Cubans have been spared the American revolution of culture as commerce, or vice versa, thanks to its isolation and the U.S. embargo, which has essentially given Cuba the freedom to develop a real identity. The McDonald super-size gospel has yet to taint Cuba's shores.

Amigo comandante Che Guevara... Fuck you, man! A little black boy barks into my camera, as his 7 years old buddy cheers him on. I am surrounded by relatively hostile children who want a dollar or just show off their parent's English skills. The denser the population gets in the poorer barrios, the more aggressive their inhabitant's behaviour. Try Washington Heights in New York, Watts in L.A., the South Side of Chicago, Tijuana, Rio's favelas, Bombay, Frankfurt's suburbs, Rome, Cairo. Here in the midst of Havana decay, I am a welcome target for casual insult and solicitation. A young woman selling sweets that look like sauerkraut wants to marry me today. Another just wants a baby with my hair colour.

So, you wanna adopt a grandma? Just one? We have 26 here, from 68 to 91, mostly women. Adopt two grannies get one free, the administrator jokes. At la Casa del Abuelo in the San Ysidro barrio of old Havana near the train station, life is pretty good. For the equivalent of one dollar per month old folks may spend six months to a year here, every day, be served three meals, watch movies, chat in the garden patio, play dominos or tell tales. The house has day care for up to forty. A staff of 8 dedicated specialists helps them learn to live with advanced age. Every sector of the city has a corresponding care center. I am welcomed like Jimmy Carter, take everyone's picture except for one old lady who is afraid her frizzled hair will give Cuba a bad image.

An American couple from Pennsylvania, approaches me, asking if I speak English. I spare them my facetious reflex. She expresses surprise at the absence of obesity in Cuba. I point out the scarcity of food. He decries the overwhelming aspect of hustle and prostitution here in Central Park. I ask if they have been to Sunset Boulevard or South Beach? or flipped through the 275 full page sex ads in the Las Vegas yellow pages? She acknowledges my perspective. He's astonished that people are so well dressed. They are staying in a Condo out of town. A tourist resort, their first foray into the gritty present tense of this Capital. He notes the absence of graffiti. I point out the lack of spray paint. She laments the begging, I suggest they get a pocket full of quarters. He says they only have a few hours left in the city. I ask what overall impression they will carry home? They both agree, socialism is not as bad as they thought, were it not for the all apparent poverty. I explain the difference between poverty and misery. They appreciate it.

Negotiating carefully but determinedly through the narrow streets under restoration, Leo leads me to his casa natal, the exact place of his birth 33 years ago. Behind a grand portal, 50 years or more without maintenance we ascend three flights of improvised stairs, some perilous wooden planks, to a tiny chamber, right out of the 17th. century, discounting the 50 year old fridge. The dust of decades, the irreversible stench of biography. Hard to imagine this place could have ever sheltered young lovers. But Leo is proud, because this is where his rock and roll life was formed. "One day I'll turn it into an art gallery, maybe". He is full of ideas and loves his rum from a water glass. His novia is mad right now, she claims to have smelled someone else's perfume on him the other night. "Let her be mad. I have lots of stuff to do."

He'll be heading to Guantanamo to collect some pieces of wood for larger sculptures, as he has an exposition lined up this summer. "Life in Havana is a gas", he glows. He could never imagine living anywhere else, except maybe a few years from now at a small finca he inherited from his grandma, a couple of hours south of town. He dreams of turning a 500 dollar investment into a \$10,000 a year paradise, two pair of rabbits, a large garden, some avocado trees, "you know how much an avocado is worth? 50 cents!" But that's down the line, these days he is selling anatomy sculptures and statues, custom jobs, to those who find his tiny studio in Central Havana.

Outside, his mother sells caramelos at one peso, which at 50% profit brings in about 30 dollars per month, illegally of course, plus her \$3 pension. Occasionally, Leo may make 40 dollars in a single day. No one bothers him about permits or taxes or fines or anything at all. He respects Fidel, the wise man, but acknowledges the shortcomings of the State and the corruption of its administrators. I tell him how in the United States this appears exactly reversed. Where social contract and sincere effort of local government provide a good quality of life, but the federal leadership is an elite assembly of misanthropes. I dare to calculate that 80% of all Cubans respect if not revere Fidel as their benign dictator.

Others could care less or are besmirchers by default. The majority of Cubans do not belong to the communist party. Leo lost a brother who tried crossing over to prosperity he suspected in Florida, he was eaten by sharks. A kid recently froze to death as stowaway in the wheel chambers of a British Jet at 30,000 feet. Leo points out that stupidity is at the core of such desperation. There are some two million Cubans living abroad. He hears that the exaggerated quantity of Cuban refugees in Spain has caused a problem of unforeseen dimensions. Everyone wants to make a living as a Salsa teacher. There aren't enough pupils. Here at home they never experienced the pressure of independence. Now, drugs and crime replace rum and hustle. Many have been accustomed to struggle among the struggling, but the complications of exile often throw them into aimless misery. Those, that turn out successes, adopt the hyphenated life style of their new home land, and provide often substantial economic support to their loved ones left behind. Leo tells me of a prima, who has a three story house in Santo Domingo, Dominican

Republic. She's divorcing and while economically well off, lonely and far from home. "What good is a marvellous house when your heart is not satisfied?"

"You need to fill your mind, find things to do," he says. He can party all night or two in a row, yet he will always rise at 7 AM and find a project, restore antique furniture for a neighbour, fix a platform shoe for a friend, make a sculpture, visit with friends and always happy to share a dollar or a zip of rum. A seemingly endless job in Havana would be building restoration, if you love that kind of stuff. Being a writer is tough, as you would only have government channels available for publication. And your non-aligned opinion will not be welcome. At the end of the day, unless you love your work, you will sink into an aimless slumber drenched by rum and nicotine, until you wake to renewed hunger for a cheese pizza or a ham bocadito. 5 pesos, ding-dong, psst!

We take the small ferry from Havana to Regla, a quieter provincial community across the harbour, from where the Havana skyline could be mistaken for Venice. Due to the recent ferry hijackings, its perpetrators having been executed, security is tight. A passenger quietly jokes "all aboard, next stop Miami". Leo loves Regla. Here he would come as a kid when he skipped school sometimes. Wander the quiet streets and make friends that we visit today. At no point are we stopped by police, not a single ding-dong, your identity card please; which I comment to Leo, who is mestizo and could pass for an Italian. So, my walks with Raffa and the constant police checks are definitely attributed to colour. The definition of "asedio al turista", the official term for hustling a tourist relates to non-whites and women. A fragile young woman, wanting to converse with me, tells me the fine for "asedio" is 450 pesos. "What is this? an interview?" she wonders. Raffa tells me that it's unlikely they'd have to pay in currency, if they spent a half an hour with the cop. I ask Leo why he thinks in such a colourful society this discrimination would be tolerated. He believes, hustling is predominantly a black occupation, which in my experience in Central Havana is potentially true.

In the distance, a large container ship glides out to sea, it's cargo bay imprinted with the letters CAPITAL.

Next to the Africa museum, a sign reads "looking for masons". I approach the guard and ask where I should present myself for this job and how much it pays. She plays along and refers me to Human Resources on Monday. My pay would be commensurate with my abilities. I speculate this to mean a daily ham sandwich and a kick in the butt. She cracks into hilarious laughter, encountering a new interpretation of the harsh truth. "A ham sandwich and a kick in the butt, ha, ha, ha", she reverberates, as I am already half down the block.

At the pharmacy I pay 1 peso 20 for a small tube of cream, a \$7 dollar value, 3 pesos for a three day supply of asthma treatment. At another pharmacy I am turned away for not having a prescription, my attendant telling me how she was sanctioned three months of her wages and humiliated in front of all her co-workers for having sold a prescription drug to someone outside the rules. A third pharmacy presents no problem in selling me the requested light medication, without prescription, and for the local price, the equivalent of a piece of bread.

“Reality is not as they paint it”, Pilar wants me to know. She has been taking her sick mother for treatment and in order to get the doctor’s attention, needed to slip him a five dollar bill or for the operation a twenty dollar bill. I propose, despite the fact that 20 dollars in this country is a bunch of money, that an operation will otherwise cost thousands of dollars, one way or another. She agrees but insists that if Cuba boasts health and education being so great and free, it really should be. Pilar also reveres Fidel and culpates the State administrators for the failures of the system. She is approaching 60, maintaining a medium size house with four bedrooms and two living rooms entirely by herself. Two rooms are legally rented to foreigners.

She pays 60 dollars a month for the right to operate a kitchen which is not public but used to make breakfast and sporadic meals for lodgers. State concession of 100 dollars per bedroom and other license fees to operate her registered casa particular amount to 300 dollars per month. Her activity is extremely controlled. Inspectors visit each week and review her books. Her potential monthly income at 100% occupancy amounts to 1500 dollars, as if applying a 20% equivalent of taxation.

All furniture and household items are her own cash investment, there are no deductions permitted. Her husband, a staunch defender of la revolucion does not participate in the house maintenance. He goes to the gym in the mornings and does some shopping. She is the house cleaner, laundry person, cook, receptionist, house painter, mother, wife. Her grown children live abroad. She supports her ailing mother and a slew of near and far relatives, who come by for a meal, borrow some soap, a few dollars, the phone, what have you. She seems definitely more stressed than last year, then she was able to afford a part-time domestic worker, illegally of course. Her husband laughs when she decries her never ending daily chores.

This is not revolucion, she insists. This is a pain in the knees, I have to do everything and then the inspectors come and tell me how to live in my own house. Her husband says Pilar has become apathetic to la revolucion. She does not attend any neighbourhood CDR meetings and could care less. “What good is all this hard work, if I never have any time to enjoy myself”. Pilar does not pray to any God, but believes religion can be good for people. Most of her friends are already retired and come to visit, and are relaxed, when she can barely get off her knees after scrubbing the floors. Large photographs of her daughters and grandkids fill every hall of the house and her colorful memories help her complete her day.

CDR is the tight network to defend la revolucion. Every block in every city and town in Cuba has an elected neighborhood president, a vigilant and often an ideologist, among other paid positions. Weekly round table meetings resolve neighborhood issues, but do extend into political debate. Opinion is taboo, and criticism could bring unwanted consequences, disadvantages or more severe complications no one is willing to bring upon themselves. Slogans demanding a state of alert and combative posture remind me of American TV commercials, while much more sophisticated in their presentation, designed to the same end. “estamos de guardia hoy” or “we shall never surrender,” “fifty years of victories,” “everyday a job better done.”

A mural reads, “no one can take our hope away” I ask the resident who has been living vis-a-vis this mural for years, what kind of “hope” this may refer to.

She is perplexed and says she’s never thought about it. Four construction workers, and an engineer and a cop stand by a small billboard, “a better world is possible.” I ask them how, how a better world would be possible, what should I do to make this happen and what does a better world mean? What would have to be better to make this a better world? I am let down by shrugging shoulders and a hostile look from the engineer.

At the Capitolio post office, four cents gets me a stamp for a national letter, but I am told, that what is a six hour trip by car will take 10 to 15 days by mail. After all, everyday, the mail has to be dragged from each postoffice to the central station, sorted, classified, designated, separated and dragged to the airport, put on the plane, flown if only for 30 minutes, dragged off the plane to the next city’s mail station, sorted, classified, designated, separated and dragged by the official mail carrier, if not on sick leave, to the recipient’s address, if it exists, and so it is easily a two weeks operation. He thinks it impossible to work any faster.

A local watch repair man, his little work bench placed inside an empty store passage wants to do business with me. I am to pay him 2,000 dollars per month and he is to work in my imaginary shop, where ever it is that I am from. I tell him that I will charge him 800 dollars rent for the same spot in any other capital around the world, that he would pay an additional 800 dollars in apartment rent and after insurance, interest and taxes, he’d have 200 dollars a month for a series of five dollar hamburgers which leaves him with \$2 dollars per day in disposable income. He earns two dollars in a matter of 2-3 customers as we speak.

My host is not allowed any employees in his two room hostel. Private business is not allowed to employ anyone. So only the immediate family, in this case, he and his wife, maintain their business. A relative has come to help with two days cleaning. She advises me not to work so hard, it’s not worth it, she says. Every encounter offers contradictory attitudes. Work hard, get screwed, work hard, progress, hustle to make 500 dollars per month, work to make five dollars. Ding-dong, care for some rum?

During the 2002 visit by Jimmy Carter I was most impressed by a young attorney, who contested Jimmy's pressing call for "more democracy," and all that good stuff, in front of a select crowd of La Habana University. Ignoring for a second the fact that overall Cubans are better educated than North Americans, this young man made an impressionable argument.

"When I was a boy, my family in the province sent me to school. I grew up in an environment of work and study. As a young man, I entered University, at no cost to me or my parents, on the contrary I was provided for and educated to become a lawyer, not to open a fancy practice and drive a convertible BMW but to study the laws of my country. As a graduate, my people back home urged me to represent them. So, I was elected delegado, an equivalent of congress man in your country. Here I am today, speaking before this novel audience of compatriots and your honorable delegation, Mr. Carter, respectfully pointing out that my move from a small provincial town in Cuba to representative of my people cost only the support of my people and my will to serve them. In contrast, this process in your country will require millions of dollars if not exclusive privilege. Therefore I respectfully ask you Mr. Carter, what it is that we Cubans may learn from our friends in the USA about democracy and the political process which (applause) your country has been pressing us to change, since the victory of La Revolucion.

Around the corner from the Hotel Telegrafo, a plumber is threading a piece of pipe in the street. A large, professionally produced sign above his window reads "I do not lend tools out." His friend, sitting besides him, polo shirt, nice watch, and a young man is reading the Bible. Before I can snap two shots they begin to atomize their fervent belief in the "one and only truth " upon my patient aura. I propose Jesus Christ to have been the first true communist and whole hearted revolutionary. They are stunned, threatened, not the least bit curious. I propose their witless dogma not to differentiate much from that of Fidel's "sacrifice and you shall be granted to harvest a life time of hope," but as with all disciples around the world, why would they be any different here. In general the absence of religion in the original revolucion has contributed positively to the creation of a people blessed with a huge dose of humanity. I treat you with respect, not because otherwise I will rot in hell, but because I believe that it is the right thing to do.

In Cuba I have met three classes, the middle poor, the newly rich and the always poor. Each have their own philosophy. At a dinner with young creative types, a composer, an animator, a history student, an actress, a rasta, a writer and a business man, their individual terms of acquiescence clash, if mildly. All agree, that the street cops are the evil ones. But while some believe in a just process and provisions within the system to protect their concerns and achieve results, others avoid contact with the system as much as possible. I have plenty of reason not to support la revolucion," Armando, a Grammy nominee, tells me."I can't even cross the street without being harassed by cops." Earlier today, he was walking six blocks from his house to join his musical group in a performance on stage, opposite the American Interest Section, and the cop detained

him, because his ID card was in poor condition. He protested, indicating that he had to be on stage in a few minutes, flashing his official artist ID, without luck. His friend was detained in front of CubaCell, looking to pay his phone bill. The cop accused him of having stolen the cell phone he carried. After a day in jail, a relative went to bail him out, which in itself was an adventure. In the end, the cop on duty was left with the cell phone, just to let the kid go.

At the local office of “Fines Administration”, the clerk tells me that good citizens will never be fined. Typical fines are 60 pesos for urinating in the street, which many people seem to do. I point out that there are no public restrooms in the city. He disagrees pointing to one across the street. I ask how many public restrooms there are in Havana. He smiles, “just this one.” Street vendors are fined selling trinkets, veggies and flowers, he says there are no permits for this sort of activity. Everyone’s illegal.

In totalitarian states, the government uses mind control to maintain belief in its leaders. In the USA, the media are businesses committed to maintaining belief in its sponsors. Information which is acceptable to advertisers is presented in a manner calculated to make money by increasing circulation or ratings. If this tends to make material superficial, it is because, “we the people,” will tune out anything which turns us off.

Rufino explains the difference between Capitalism and Socialism. He says in Cuba they have freedom of truth. Where as the Yankees are not afforded such values, what they claim to be freedom of the press, he says, amounts to information monopolized by magnates in cahoots with the politicians that industry sponsors. They have but freedom to make bombs and commit crimes. (Rumsfeld: “freedom to do bad things is democracy”). I intercept his litany by pointing out the relativity of truth. He thinks truth is an absolute and some things are not left to interpretation.

Elvis is a professional hustler, jinetero. He is 25, having been on the street since he was 14, one year before finishing 9th grade. He’s self confident and often easily makes 500 dollars per month, gifts, commissions, match making, history tours, tricks, gigs. He is proud to be one of the best in his field “every woman can be a whore, it may well be their destiny, but not every man can be a hustler,” he philosophizes. He’s anticipating change, be that in his personal life political or otherwise. Something’s gotta give. He’s a versatile carpenter, he claims, but, no way is he going to work under the current conditions. He spends his serious cash on entertainment. If he were to take the future into account, I suggest, he should be saving up a few bucks each week so he could buy some carpentry tools for when the situation evolves. He agrees this to be a good idea, but prefers to live it up for the time being, luckily he is not into drugs or booze. He says in Cuba, people have stopped thinking. They’ve become used to leaving the thinking to the monster. But this can’t last another 20 years, or so he hopes.

Comparing Cubans to their Imperial cousins, it is easily observed who's in better shape. Our caviar and tofu diet, our leisurely life with guru twinkles leaves us sagging and strained, wrinkled and pale. At comparative age, Cubans walk upright, proud, if not spunky, cha-cha in their lycra or stretch jeans, and occasional name brand clothing. While the average tourist's camera and clothing easily exceeds the value of all combined household possessions of the people they pass on the sidewalk, remember, it is Them, who we've come to see.

Back home, 5,000 channels on your TV set, 24 hours each day. Electronic impulses feeding you imagery and sound. 20,000 reporters racing to bring you the latest, freshest and most shocking gore, glory and humour, keeping you sitting, slobbering and wondering. Preventing you from doing, learning and seeing for yourself. Artificial eyes, limbs and voices, yelling from in front of a high-gloss Hollywood script. Numbing you, your family and neighbours. Deceiving your senses in a magical manner. Systematically spreading lies, rumors and the occasional truth. 5,000 channels of nothing, static and the distant reminder of yourself. 24 hours each day, feeding your mind, controlling your decisions, telling you to choose the latest yogurt. A depressing glimpse of how America looks these days from outside its sanctuary of self-absorption. Where a pizza can get to your house faster than an ambulance. Where drugstores make the sick walk all the way back to the end of the store to get their prescriptions, while healthy people can buy cigarettes at the front. Where people order double cheese burgers and super size fries, and a diet coke. Where we buy hot dogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight. Where banks leave both doors open and then chain pens to the counter....

Men are stupid, she tells me and that she is bored with western culture and since I feel the same way we sit on the Malecon wall. Niurka listens attentively to any triviality that one might think of saying and takes off with the most unexpected conclusions. She is highly amused about the fact that ostriches practice all possible manias except putting their heads in the sand. Sometimes she seems so defenseless with her inveterate melancholy of being, always at the mercy of the hunters, demanding like a temperamental goddess, humiliation as proof of love. Between sadness and boredom she wants to find a symbol for every object, every act. Her secret is a languid fountain of half truths.

The pleasant part of her lies is that she has a premonition of the scant effectiveness of deceit. Across the Malecon, in the sedate ritual of hanging laundry, mothers launch themselves attempting to capture their kids. Niurka closes her eyes in the manner of hypothetical ostriches. "Everything's bullshit," she whispers figuratively. Everything apart from what you and I can do.