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BLUE DOOR HAVANA

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This introductory piece to the themed issue on Scandals of Horror addresses Roland Barthes's essay "Shock-Photos," part of his celebrated volume on The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies. Drawing on Barthes and other relevant theorists, the present collection examines disturbing images in film and photography from around the globe, questioning their place in today's culture and their impact on the viewer. In "Blue Door Havana," I discuss Barthes's distinction between the "overconstructed" and "literal" representation of shocking events – an important distinction which also sheds light on images by Cuba's prominent revolutionary photographers Alberto Korda and Raul Corrales. I illustrate my piece with several snapshots of Havana – their understated sensibility contrasting with Korda and Corrales, whose flamboyant pictures, inspired by glossy fashion magazines from the West, fall more easily into Barthes's category of the "overconstructed" photography.

It is a rainy morning in Havana. My fellow tourists dissipate, each in search of their own treasure. The setting is the complete opposite of our pristine sea-side resort in Varadero. An old cathedral is under reconstruction with scaffolding and various construction equipment. I photograph a pretty square just outside the cathedral, capturing the wet trees and the wet pavement. Three old men in straw hats are playing folk songs. The building next to them has a set of tall bright-blue doors. In *On Photography*,

Susan Sontag writes about "the beauty of the cracked peeling door" and how it appeals to the Western viewer, who appreciates "the picturesqueness of disorder" (362). Sontag contrasts this sensibility with that of Communist China, where photography was required to embellish reality.

I take no side in this divide, or rather, as a native Russian, I can relate to both. The blue doors in Havana attract me for a different reason. They remind me of a remarkable show staged in a doorway that I once saw in Moscow. Cuba, it appears, follows its own path, entirely different from either China or Russia. Capturing the revolution in Cuba, Alberto Korda employed "the same ideas and techniques as in fashion photography," Jaime Sarusky writes in his introduction to Korda's book of photographs (12). Korda's hero was the photographer Raul Corrales, who as a teenager devoured glossy foreign magazines, "whose photos made his imagination soar" (5). At the Havana airport, waiting for my flight back to Canada, I leaf through pictures by Korda and Corrales, in which Cuba's capital resembles a glamorous movie set: tropical nature, the sea, and handsome rebels in black berets marching on the old regime. In the 1930s Moscow, the revolutionary director Vsevolod Meyerhold hoped to construct a new theatre with a stage shaped like a catwalk. He was not able to realize his dream; palm trees do not grow in Russia.

In his essay "Shock-Photos" – the inspiration behind this collection of texts and images – Roland Barthes observes that "it is not enough for the photographer to signify the horrible for us to experience it" (71). Discussing the Shock-Photos exhibit at the Galerie d'Orsay in Paris, Barthes writes that most of the exhibited pictures failed to produce the desired effect. The photographer, he explains, "almost always *overconstructed* the horror he is proposing, adding to the *fact*, by contrasts and parallels, the intentional *language* of horror" (Barthes 71). Barthes cites several examples of this, including a picture which "places side by side a crowd of soldiers and a field of skulls" (Barthes 71). Another photograph depicts "a column of prisoners passing a flock of sheep" (Barthes 71). These "all too skillful" photographs, Barthes argues, take away an opportunity to reflect and judge, leaving the viewer with nothing but "a simple right of intellectual acquiescence" (71).

Barthes singles out a selection of news-agency photos, also displayed at the exhibit, in which "the fact, surprised, explodes in all of its stubbornness, its literality, in the very obviousness of its obtuse nature" (73). These news-agency shots depicting "the executed Guatemalans," or "the policeman's raised truncheon," Barthes points out, are "visually diminished, dispossessed of that *numen* which the painters would not have failed to add to them" (73). The "*naturalness* of these images," Barthes continues, "compels the spectator to a violent interrogation"

(73). The viewers must themselves elaborate on the picture and place their own judgment – "without being encumbered by the demiurgic presence of the photographer" (Barthes 73). According to Barthes, these "visibly diminished" news-agency shots exhibit "that critical catharsis Brecht demands," rather than "an emotive purgation," characteristic of painting (73). "The literal photograph," Barthes concludes his essay, "introduces us to the scandal of horror, not to horror itself" (73). In what follows, the reader will find a selection of provocative essays dealing with both the "overconstructed" and "literal" representation of disturbing events. Alluding to Barthes and other influential thinkers, the essays explore diverse examples of "scandals of horror" – shocking images in film and photography drawn from a variety of historical eras and geographical locations from Bombay to Moscow to Rwanda.

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