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Tres tristes tigres: The Lost City

Guillermo Cabrera Infante's novel, *Tres tristes tigres*, followed the success of his short story collection, *Así en la paz como en la guerra*. However, if *Así en la paz como en la guerra* is a document of a pre-revolutionary Cuba, then *Tres tristes tigres* is its memory. Written after the triumph of the Revolution, it again focuses on the situation that precipitated the overthrow of Batista and, with him, a way of life. The new Cuba marks a profound turning point for all Latin America with repercussions throughout the world. Thus one can surmise that a recollection of pre-1959 Havana would be a recollection of a society degenerating into chaos and destruction. *Tres tristes tigres* is exactly that vision.

Tres tristes tigres has been called "un vasto fragmento"¹ for its Borges-like complexity and fragmentation of time. The reader must piece together the scenes (which begin with a master of ceremonies' opening spiel at the Tropicana Club and end with a mad woman muttering in the park) in order to form a coherent picture of the actor Arsenio Cué, the journalist Silvestre, the photographer Códac, and the bongo-player Eribó. As these characters go from nightclub to nightclub, they remember their arrival in Havana, pursue love affairs, and reminisce about their dead friend Bustrófedon. Mainly they talk. The talk is witty, full of allusions to literature and the cinema, and so full of puns that the reader becomes suspicious of every phrase. However, the talk hardly ever becomes dialogue in the sense of mutual communication, because it is talk aimed at hiding, rather than revealing, thoughts and motivations.

While the novel contains an incredible variety of scenes and subcurrents, there are several main threads that constitute the "plot" of the work. The chapters entitled "Ella cantaba boleros" are a narration by Códac, the nightclub photographer, which entails the rise to stardom and death of La Estrella, an immensely fat and immensely gifted singer of boleros. The section entitled "Rompecabeza" is a catalogue of the word-play of Bustrófedon, which includes parodies of Cuba's leading writers. If there is a plot in the conventional sense, then it is the relationship between Arsenio Cué and Silvestre. They are both in love with Laura, both come to Havana to flee the poverty of their villages, and both are disciples of the word-master, Bustrófedon.

There is much more included in *Tres tristes tigres* than these major threads of narration, however. There is the rise of the beautiful but cruel Cuba Venegas, as well as a series of monologues of a woman talking to her psychiatrist. One of the most delightful of the minor characters is Delia Doce, who writes a misspelled letter to her friend in the city. The result of all these parts is a kaleidoscope of lives intertwining in the *La Rampa* nightclub district of Havana. There is no solution offered at the end of the novel; the ending is really the coming of the Revolution itself, unspoken, yet waiting. Thus, the reader provides the ending from his own experience.

This "gallery of voices,"² as Cabrera Infante aptly calls his work, outrages many critics who see no order, no purpose, and no discipline in the novel. Others have come to the realization that there is very little that is accidental about *Tres tristes tigres*. Indeed, in the view of Carlos Fuentes, the apparent disorder of the novel is the proper technique to describe Hispanic America: "si en América Latina las obras literarias se contentasen con reflejar o justificar el orden establecido, serían anacrónicas: inútiles. Nuestras obras deben ser de desorden: es decir, de un orden posible, contrario al actual."³ From the many voices of *Tres tristes tigres*, there is one central voice: this world of nightclubs, military strongmen, rich Americans, and desperate poor is a world about to die. It is an Havana "cuya belleza tiene el encanto decadente de las cosas condenadas a desaparecer."⁴

Tres tristes tigres is, first of all, a work of nostalgia, an elegy to the Havana that vanished in the Revolution. The novel is preceded by a phrase by Lewis Carroll: "Y trató de imaginar cómo se vería la luz de una vela cuando está apagada." Then we are immediately plunged into the opening speech of the emcee at the Tropicana Club:

Showtime! Señoras y señores. Ladies and gentlemen. Muy buenas noches, damas y caballeros, tengan todos ustedes. Good-evening, ladies & gentlemen. Tropicana, el cabaret MAS fabuloso del mundo . . . "Tropicana," the most fabulous night-club in the WORLD . . . presenta . . . presents . . . su nuevo espectáculo . . . its new show . . .⁵

This introduction is more evocative than a physical description of the city could be, for the city, like the nightclub, hides its truth behind a façade of glamour and excitement. When Silvestre calls Havana "una sabrosa bella durmiente blanca ciudad," his friend Arsenio replies, "Pero no es blanca ni roja, sino rosada. Es una ciudad tibia, la ciudad de los tibios" (p. 354). The themes that Cabrera Infante explores reflect this city of the lukewarm; it is a city of materialism and poverty, dominated by a foreign culture and economy that degrade the indigenous culture to perpetual underdevelopment. Its citizens are the products of such a society: ambitious, yet carrying guilt, solitude, and loss of identity within themselves. Thus *Tres tristes tigres*, a novel noted for its humor, contains a very serious assessment of pre-Revolution Cuba. One aspect of this assessment is the human toll of poverty.

Cuba, for all its relative prosperity by Latin American standards, falls prey to the materialistic problems of underdevelopment in *Tres tristes tigres*. From the ranks of the poor emerge the ruthlessly ambitious, the social climbers, hangers-on, the exploiters, and the exploited. In a society spurred on by hunger, the human values of kindness, integrity, honor, and morality are often reserved for those with the money and leisure to afford them. Many of the novel's characters find their lives determined by a desire to leave behind poverty. The destructiveness of the desire lies in the price one has to pay, as may be seen in two women, Cuba Venegas and La Estrella.

Cuba Venegas is first introduced in the novel by means of a misspelled letter from her mother's best friend, Delia Doce. Delia bears the news that the former Gloria Pérez "ya no se llama ni gloria ni Pérez ni cosa que se le parezca.

Ella se llama ahora Cuba Venegas que parece ser un nombre que vende según nos dijo ella, pero a mí no me preguntes qué es lo que vende” (p. 31). The former Gloria has abandoned her studies for a *carpe diem* career as model and singer:

. . . nos dijo que ella no pensaba estudiar ni cosa que se le pareciera eso fue lo que nos dijo y nos dijo además que ella no iba a pasarse cuatro o cinco años de su vida matándose trabajando por el día y luego teniendo que estudiar por la noche sin salir ni ir a ningún lado y sin divertirse, para que luego tener que trabajar como una mula en una oficina y ganar como una pulga, eso fue lo que dijo (pp. 28-29).

Other people are but stepping stones for Cuba Venegas. When her “discoverer” Eribó the bongo-player is no longer useful, she feigns illness to go out with Códac, the next step on her ladder. Códac is in turn left to observe bitterly from a distance: “vi a Cuba, entera como está, más alta y más bella y más puta que nunca . . .” (p. 272). In this context her name becomes significant, indicating that the island Cuba is also willing to accept an exploitive relationship with the United States for immediate gains.

Cabrera Infante parallels the story of Cuba Venegas with that of Estrella Rodríguez, the *bolero* singer, more simply known as La Estrella. Ambitious in proportion to her talent and great size, La Estrella gives herself over to managers who promise her fame and wealth. The unscrupulous managers send her on a tour of Mexico against the advice of her doctor who warned of heart attack in the high altitude. In Mexico she dies, never gaining the money and name for which she hungered. La Estrella engages in cultural prostitution, selling her mastery of the uniquely Cuban *bolero* to the highest bidder.

Ambition can carry a high price indeed, as many of the characters of *Tres tristes tigres* discover. Guilt is the theme of the numbered scenes that make up a woman’s visit to a psychiatrist. She tells him of seeing her childhood friend working as a kitchen helper in her fiancé’s house:

Estaba tan vieja, doctor, tan acabada y tenía mi edad, mi misma edad y había jugado conmigo cuando niñas y éramos muy amigas . . . y hacíamos planes para cuando fuéramos mayor, que me dió una pena terrible saludarla y reconocerla, porque ella se iba a sentir tan mal, que salí de la cocina. Luego, otra vez en la sala, por poco voy a la cocina y la saludo, porque pensé que no la había saludado porque tenía miedo que la familia de Ricardo supiera que yo era del campo y había sido tan pobre. Pero no fui (p. 158).

Later she relates a confused story of how the friend had been raped as a girl by her employer, a baker. Ironically, the baker put bread in the girl’s mouth to stop her screams. The patient’s guilt is such that her identity has become uncertain:

Se lo he contado a mi marido. Se lo he contado muchas veces, pero él me pelea, porque dice que parece que todo eso me pasó a mí y no a la amiga mía. Lo cierto es, doctor, que ya no sé si me pasó a mí o si le pasó a mi amiguita o si lo inventé yo misma. Aunque estoy segura que no lo inventé. Sin embargo, hay veces que pienso que yo soy en realidad mi amiguita (p. 447).

Lack of identity is common to almost all the characters. In a ruthless world of rapid social rising and falling, appearances and manners become of utmost importance. One's identity must be uprooted and altered in order to qualify for the next step up the social ladder.

False names—Códac, Cuba Venegas, Bustrófedon, Eribó—abound in *Tres tristes tigres*. Affected poses, false erudition, and social pretensions are so prevalent that surface appearances are almost automatically suspect. Arsenio Cué, for instance, appears in public as a cosmopolitan man whose culture has prepared him for every occasion. Eribó, the bongo player, comments upon meeting Cué for the first time: "Las presentaciones las hizo en inglés y para mostrar que era contemporáneo de la ONU se puso a hablar en francés con su novia o marinovia, o lo que fuera. Esperé que cambiara para alemán o ruso o italiano a la menor provocación, pero no lo hizo" (p. 94). There are hints, however, that his erudition is superficial, as when a cab driver interrupts Cué and Silvestre who are arguing about the name of the composer of a musical piece on the radio:

—Caballeros, ni Jaíden ni Jándel. Es Mósar.

.....

—¿Y cómo usted lo sabe?—preguntó Cué.

—Porque lo dijo el locutor.

Arsenio Cué no se podía quedar callado.

—¿Y a usted, un chófer, le interesa esa música?

El chofer, sin embargo, tuvo la última palabra.

—¿Y a usted, un pasaje, le interesa? (p. 107).

In reality, Cué moved to Havana from the country. The background he hides is revealed in a monologue of his first days in the city, living on coffee and occasionally a bit of bread:

Vi frente a mí un hombre joven (cuando entré estaba a mi lado, pero me volví) de aspecto cansado, pelo revuelto y ojos opacos. Estaba mal vestido, con la camisa sucia y la corbata que no anudaba bien separada del cuello sin abrochar sin botón. La hacía falta afeitarse y por los lados de la boca le bajaba un bigote lacio y mal cuidado. Levanté la mano para dársela, al tiempo que inclinaba un poco la cabeza y él hizo lo mismo. Vi que sonreía y sentí que yo también sonreía: los dos comprendimos al mismo tiempo: era un espejo (p. 54).

The Cué of the nightclubs, the Cué of the television, the Cué seen escorting American heiresses, has turned his back on that figure in the mirror. His pose is now his identity: ". . . miré a Cué que bebía su cerveza como hacía todo, como un actor posando en todas las posiciones y algunas veces de perfil" (p. 301). Silvestre realizes that the aimless, high-speed drive of "Bachata" serves to erase the past that Cué no longer wishes to acknowledge:

Cuando Cué hablaba del tiempo y del espacio y recorría todo aquel espacio en todo nuestro tiempo pensé que era para divertirnos y ahora lo sé: era así: era para hacer una cosa diversa, otra cosa, y mientras corríamos por el espacio conseguía eludir lo que siempre evitó, creo, que era recorrer otro espacio fuera del tiempo—o más claro—, recordar (p. 297).

Even at the end of the novel, the reader has never penetrated Cué's disguise sufficiently to determine when he is speaking the truth. Does he really intend to join the guerrilla movement? Does he love Vivian Smith Corona? Even his friends cannot distinguish whether he is being sincere or merely playing his part. This uncertainty extends to other characters and situations as well. The reader of the novel is constantly being faced with a fact that is negated later on. With whom did Vivian Smith Corona lose her virginity? One must choose whether to accept Eribó's version or Cué's version—or neither version. Cué seems to be murdered, but the bullets were blanks. At the time of the narrative, both Bustrófedon and La Estrella are dead, although they at first seem alive. The novel takes place mostly in nightclubs, a tinsel and guilt world where the candlelight hides detail from the probing eye. Bustrófedon, a major influence in the novel, lives only in the memories of the other characters. He is merely a shadow as Cué realizes: “¿No te parece significativo que no acertara con el mejor [palíndromo], el más difícil y más fácil, con el temible? *Yo soy*” (p. 358).

Lacking identity of their own, the characters often take on roles from the cinema or literature. In an uncertain situation, the characters often act out cinematic reactions:

—Te podría decir lo que dijo Clark Gable en el banquete o symposium de a bordo, donde no querían admitir a ese fantasma platinado, Jean Harlow, al decidir irse con ella a navegar por otros mares de locura, que dijo, citando al reo cuando le pusieron el nudo corredizo, “Es una lección que nunca olvidaré” (p. 443).

For Silvestre, even his feelings become real when associated with fiction:

Me sentí Philip Marlowe en una novela de Raymond Chandler. O mejor Robert Montgomery en la versión de una novela de Chandler. O mejor todavía, la cámara que hacía del ojo de Montgomery-Marlowe-Chandler en los mejores, inolvidables momentos de *La Dama en el Lago*, vista en el Alkázár el 7 de septiembre de 1946 (p. 320).

By choosing to act out his feelings in terms of the cinema, Silvestre effectively removes himself from the situation. Within the world of *Tres tristes tigres*, the movies “function as a symbol or symptom of disjunctive reality, an externalization of the characters' failure to integrate themselves into their environment.”⁶

The result of the characters' lack of identity and artificial feelings is great emptiness. Human contact is cut off because it threatens the success of the role being played. Even though the characters are rarely alone, the alcoholic friendliness of the nightclubs offers no relief from loneliness. Even Silvestre finds that his friend Arsenio Cué cannot share his feelings when he shares an important incident from childhood:

—Pareces Borges—me dijo—. Llámalo Tema del Malo y el Bueno.
No entendió. No podría entender. No comprendió que no era una fábula ética, que lo contaba por contar, por comunicar un recuerdo nítido, que era

un ejercicio en nostalgia. Sin rencor al pasado. No podía comprender. En fin (p. 347).

When the nightclubs close, Silvestre must face the dawn alone:

. . . en silencio entré en casa y en silencio me quité la camisa y los zapatos en silencio y en silencio fui al baño y oriné y me saqué los dientes en más silencio y en silencio y en sigilo metí el puente en un velero en un vaso y escondí en silencio esta hierofanía dental arriba detrás del botiquín y en silencio fui a la cocina y tomé agua en silencio . . . en silencio cerré las persianas en silencio y fui en silencio a mi cuarto y me desnudé en silencio y abrí la ventana en silencio por donde entró el silencio de la última noche en silencio . . . (p. 444).

This terrifying solitude in *Tres tristes tigres* is founded on lack of communication. For all the talk, communication is less its purpose than building a verbal barrier between the inner soul and the eyes of others. In spite of the amusement of the jokes and puns, there is a great sadness behind them. The second half of *Tres tristes tigres* is a conversation between the two friends, Arsenio Cué and Silvestre. Their dialogue is an endless stream of witty remarks, puns, risqué comments, and thrusts at literature and cinema. The humor becomes forced and tiring, but the two friends are afraid to stop. Each has an urgent need to speak seriously to the other about a difficult decision: Silvestre plans to marry; Arsenio plans to join the guerrillas in the mountains. Neither, however, can break the barriers their wit has placed between them. The characters are isolated in the jokes that block understanding, even when they attempt to communicate:

—Me voy al Sierra.

—Es muy temprano para la noche y muy tarde para la madrugada. No va a estar abierto.

—A la Sierra, no al Sierra.

—¿A Nicanor del Campo ahora?

—No, coño, me voy al monte. Me alzo. Me hago guerrillero.

—¡Qué!

—Que me uno a Fiel, a Fidel.

—Estás borracho hermano.

—Nonó, en serio. Estoy borracho, sí. Pancho Villa estaba siempre borracho y míralo. Por favor, *te lo pido*, no te vuelvas a mirar si entra o no entra Pancho Villa. Hablo en serio. Me voy al monte. . . .

—Irse a la Sierra, a la guerra. Es meterse en la Legión Extranjera . . . Sigue así y terminarás como Ronald Colman. Primero mucho Beau Geste y después creyéndote Otelo y al final muerto en el cine y muerto en la vida y muerto total (P. 347).

The characters in *Tres tristes tigres* share these concerns of solitude and lack of communication with all modern men faced with an anonymous society without the former support of faith. After death there is void, as Arsenio Cué believes:

Hay más nada que ser. La nada está siempre ahí, latente. El ser tiene que hacerse expreso. El ser sale de la nada, lucha por evidenciarse y luego desaparece otra vez, en la nada.

No vivimos en la nada, pero de alguna manera la nada vive en nosotros.

La nada no es lo contrario del ser. El ser es la nada por otros medios (p. 323).

Death is unthinkable "porque la única cosa por que siento un odio mortal es el olvido" (p. 287). La Estrella's ambition for fame, a means of surviving death, is thwarted by her premature death, surviving only in Silvestre's memory:

. . . es verdad que ella está muerta y que dentro de poco nadie la recordará y estaba bien viva cuando la conocí y ahora de aquel monstruo humano, de aquella vitalidad enorme, de aquella personalidad única no queda más que un esqueleto igual a todos . . . (p. 286).

The tragedy of Bustrófedon's death during an operation to remove a tumor is increased by the fact that the tumor gave him his wonderful verbal ability described by the doctor as the failure of "*la función cerebral del simbolismo del pensar por el habla*" (pp. 222-223). By removing his unique insight into words, the doctors destroyed Bustrófedon's identity, and he too must join La Estrella among the forgotten. Cué combats death by making it the pretext for a witticism: "La muerte es la gran niveladora: la buldozer de Dios" (p. 334). Humor, however, cannot hide fear of death. The horror of death makes the need to break the barriers of solitude and lack of communication even more urgent. The epilogue, a mad woman's mutterings, illustrates that those barriers continue unbreached. *Tres tristes tigres* is, then, "una provocación constante a la imaginación, a la sensibilidad, a la risa, a la ternura, y también a un subterráneo, calladísimo, más bien secreto pudor para nombrar lo más doloroso."

The situation of Cuba parallels the fate of the characters in *Tres tristes tigres*. It too has lost its identity in the face of American domination and political opportunism. Just as La Estrella sells out to the highest bidder, Cuba has exchanged its national integrity for North American materialism.

The opening pages are a good introduction to American domination. The master of ceremonies at the Tropicana Club alternately speaks in English, then in Spanish, as he explains to the Cubans in the audience:

Pueblo, público, queridos concurrentes, perdonen un momento mientras me dirijo, en el idioma de *Chakespeare*, en *English*, me dirijo a la selecta concurrencia que colma *todas y cada unas* de las localidades de este emporio del amor y la vida risueña. Quiero hablarle, si la amabilidad proverbial del Respetable cubano me lo permite, a nuestra ENorme concurrencia americana: caballerosos y radiantes turistas que visitan la tierra de las *gay senyoritaes and brave caballeros* . . . (p. 16).

In the please-the-tourist atmosphere of the nightclub, the characterization of the island as "*la tierra de las gay senyoritaes and brave caballeros*" is perhaps understandable, but Cabrera Infante's placement of the speech as the introduction to the novel gives it emphasis as an integral part of the book. It foreshadows the attitude of Cubans throughout the work toward their own country. The domination by the United States was a domination by means of commercialism. Practically no manufactured items were Cuban in origin, breeding a dependence on the United States and at the same time stifling Cuban economic growth. The prosperity in Cuba according to economic tables is a false prosperity unable to be self-sustaining. The picture of Livia at her dressing table is a picture of foreign domination:

Livia saca de la caja de laca un collar de varias vueltas, de perlas de cultivo: todo lo que usa Livia es de calidad pero de una calidad mediocre, falsa: una vez un fotógrafo, Jesse Fernández, que le hizo varias fotografías me dijo: "Baby, aquí será una modelo, pero en Nueva York o Elei sería una callgirl de lujo" /*Livia tú piensas que el Caraseda de Lena Rubistein sea mejor que la Mascaramatic o me ponga el AyChado o el Comestico de Arden* (p. 155).

Such dependence on foreign products breeds self-imposed underdevelopment. The idea of an inventor in Cuba seems absurd even to the women of doubtful character who accompany Silvestre and Arsenio Cué. Magalena knows that "En Cuba no hay inventores. . . . Aquí to viene de fuera" (p. 381). The exploits of a fictional Cuban inventor are funny—"Como las máquinas que ruedan sin gasolina, por gravedad. No hay más que construir las calles cuesta abajo. La Shell descubrirá que su perla es de cultivo" (p. 384)—but pathetic. The very fact that the idea of a Cuban inventor is funny offers no hope for Cuba's development. Commercialism, according to traditional Hispanic stereotypes, is only to be expected from the Anglo culture. However, the final humiliation is to accept American domination in the arts. Arsenio Cué indicts the Cuban public for its superficiality of understanding even of foreign literature:

Toda la demás gente de tu generación no son más que malos lectores de Faulkner y Hemingway y Dos Passos y entre los más adelantaditos del Pobre Scott y Salinger y Styron . . . hay también los peores lectores de Borges y alguien que lee pero no entiende a Sartre ni entiende a Pavese pero lo lee y leen y no entienden ni sienten a Nabokov . . . (p. 340).

Cuban writers receive the most blame, as Cabrera Infante parodies seven leading writers of the island. Each gives his version of the assassination of Trotsky. Even the titles of the parodies reveal the artificial styles of the authors: José Martí and "Los hachacitos de rosa"; José Lezama Lima and "Nuncupatoria de un cruzado"; Virgilio Piñera, "Tarde de los asesinos"; Lydia Cabrera, "El indisime bebe la moskuba que lo consagra bolchevikua"; Lino Novás, "¡Trínquenme ahí a Mornard!"; Alejo Carpentier, "El ocaso"; and Nicolás Guillén, "Elegía por Jacques Mornard (en el cielo de Lecumberri)." To Cabrera Infante, these writers have ignored the rich Cuban heritage to pursue European trends or exaggerated ethnic styles. This "traición de la esencia nacional"⁸ is an alienation from the people. Lydia Cabrera's Afro-Cuban interpretation complete with glossaries receives a Hollywood-Swahili treatment from Cabrera Infante:

El hombre blanco (*Molná mundele*) llegó, vio y mató a León (*Simba*) Trotsky. Le clavó la "guámpara" en el "coco" y lo mandó para su "In-Kamba finda ntoto" (tumba fría). Para asestar el golpe final, los *orishas* siempre fueron consultados de antemano (p. 237).

Just as exotic is Alejo Carpentier's studied cosmopolitanism:

L'importanza del mio compito non me impede di fare molti sbagli . . . el anciano se detuvo en aquella frase truncada con regüeldos de mortificaciones, mientras pensaba: "Tengo un santo horror a los diálogos" y lo traducía mentalmente al francés para ver qué tal sonaba . . . (p. 241).

This passage suggests that the lack of dialogue in Carpentier's works is indicative of how alien to the people they are. Isolated from the vigor of everyday modes of speech, Carpentier's writings seem sterile and artificially literary. "Style" as consciously cultivated is the "terror central" of the parodies: "El estilo es la negación, en el planteamiento de esta novela, de esa realidad solamente oral, hablada, donde el tiempo está vivo y donde el mito se precisa y se oscurece."⁹

American dominance is evident in the spoken word as well as written language. The result is neither English nor Spanish:

—Arsenio es el nombre. Arsenio Cué.

Feroz anglicista traduciendo naturalmente del americano. Dice, también, afluyente por próspero, morón por idiota, me luce por me parece, chance por oportunidad, controlar por revisar y muchas más cosas. Qué horror el Espanglish (p. 369).

The artificial economy imposed by foreign domination creates a gulf between the very rich and the very poor. The two worlds are constantly in collision in the novel and provide background and motivation for most of the characters. One of the most bitter of the collisions is the scene in which Ribot, the bongo player, goes to his employer to ask for a raise in his pay of twenty-five pesos a month:

Solaún y Zuleta, Viriato-Senador vitalicio de la República, hombre de negocios presidente de honor del Centro Vasco y del Centro de Dependientes. socio fundador del Habana Yacht & Country Club, primer accionista de Papelimport y administrador gerente de Publicaciones Solaz, S. A., que en la Guía Social de La Habana era una página entera, con hijos, hijas, nueras, yernos y nietos y sobrinos y sobrino-nietos, convenientemente ilustrada con fotos del grupo familiar, habló de nuevo y por fin:

—¿Veinticinco a la semana? Pero hombre, Ribot, eso son cien pesos al mes (pp. 51-52).

The political unrest that such unequal distribution of the wealth inevitably breeds is in the very atmosphere of the novel. The terrorism that turned the streets of Havana into an armed camp in the last year before the revolution and caused a younger Cabrera Infante to write the vignettes for *Así en la paz como en la guerra* is also present in *Tres tristes tigres*. Silvestre is remembering the ploys he and his brother used as children to go to the movies. Too old for success at former tricks, the boys must somehow raise the money for tickets. This obstacle overcome (for that week, at least), they begin the difficult problem of choosing which movie to see. In the midst of an amusing and somewhat precocious analysis of each theatre's offerings, a man is assassinated in front of the children:

De pronto, todo es confusión. La gente corre, alguien me empuja por un hombro, una mujer chilla y se esconde tras una máquina y mi hermano me hala me hala me hala como un sueño persistente por la mano, por el brazo, por la camisa y grita: "¡Silvestre que te matan!" (p. 41).

The incident is all the more shocking for its suddenness and contrast with the innocence of the children.

Yet, the novel avoids direct political involvement, reflecting Cué's abstention:

- Batista trata de que cruce la bahía.
—Pero no tiene futuro. Ya lo verás.
—¿Quién, Batista?
Me miró y se sonrió.
—¿Qué tú quieres?
—¿Yo? Nada.
—Tú sabes que nunca hablo de política. Esa es mi política. (p. 301).

Instead, Cabrera Infante lets the decay show in the characters and in the setting. The reader comes to realize the immense solitude of life in La Rampa (and, by extension, Cuba). The island and its people have lost their identity, taking on instead a borrowed one from a foreign culture. As significant as what is included in the novel is what is omitted. Not present are those institutions that protect man from the vastness of time and existence: religion, philosophy, family, marriage. There is little of the past and less of the future. The result is a feeling of chaos and lack of order, reinforced by the episodic, nonlinear structure of the work. Some characters still seek the key to order, but Arsenio Cué expresses the futility of the search:

Hay quienes ven la vida lógica y ordenada, otros la sabemos absurda y confusa. El arte (como la religión o como la ciencia o como la filosofía) es otro intento de imponer la luz del orden a la tinieblas del caos. Feliz tú, Silvestre, que puedes o crees que puedes hacerlo por el verbo (p. 334).

The lack of time references and the open-ended nature of the ending cause a suspension of time, capturing as in a glass bubble an Havana doomed by the revolutionaries its weakness bred. Through the characters of *Tres tristes tigres*, the reader learns "what Cuban culture consisted of in 1959—the bastard culture of an island dependent on North Americans, with Spanglish as one of its idioms, with instant commercialization and with a consumer culture overlaying any other aspirations."¹⁰

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NOTES

1. Alfred J. MacAdam, "Tres tristes tigres: El vasto fragmento," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 92-93 (julio-diciembre, 1975), p. 549.
2. Rita Guibert, *Seven Voices*, trans. Francis Partridge (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 414.
3. Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (México: Cuadernos de Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), pp. 31-32.
4. Luis B. Eyzaguirre, *El Héroe en la novela hispanoamericana del siglo XX* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1973), p. 313.

5. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *Tres tristes tigres* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1971), p. 15. All further citations are from this edition. Future references will be included by page number in the text.
6. Julianna Burton, "Learning to Write at the Movies: Film and the Fiction Writer in Latin America," *Texas Quarterly*, XVIII (Spring, 1975), pp. 99-100.
7. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Estructura y significaciones de *Tres tristes tigres*." *Sur*, CCCXX (septiembre-octubre, 1969), p. 51.
8. Reynaldo Luis Jiménez-Sánchez, "Guillermo Cabrera Infante y *Tres tristes tigres*," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1974), p. 117.
9. Julio Ortega, *Relato de la Utopía* (Barcelona: La Gaya Ciencia, 1973), p. 147.
10. Jean Franco, *A Literary History of Spain* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973), p. 272.

