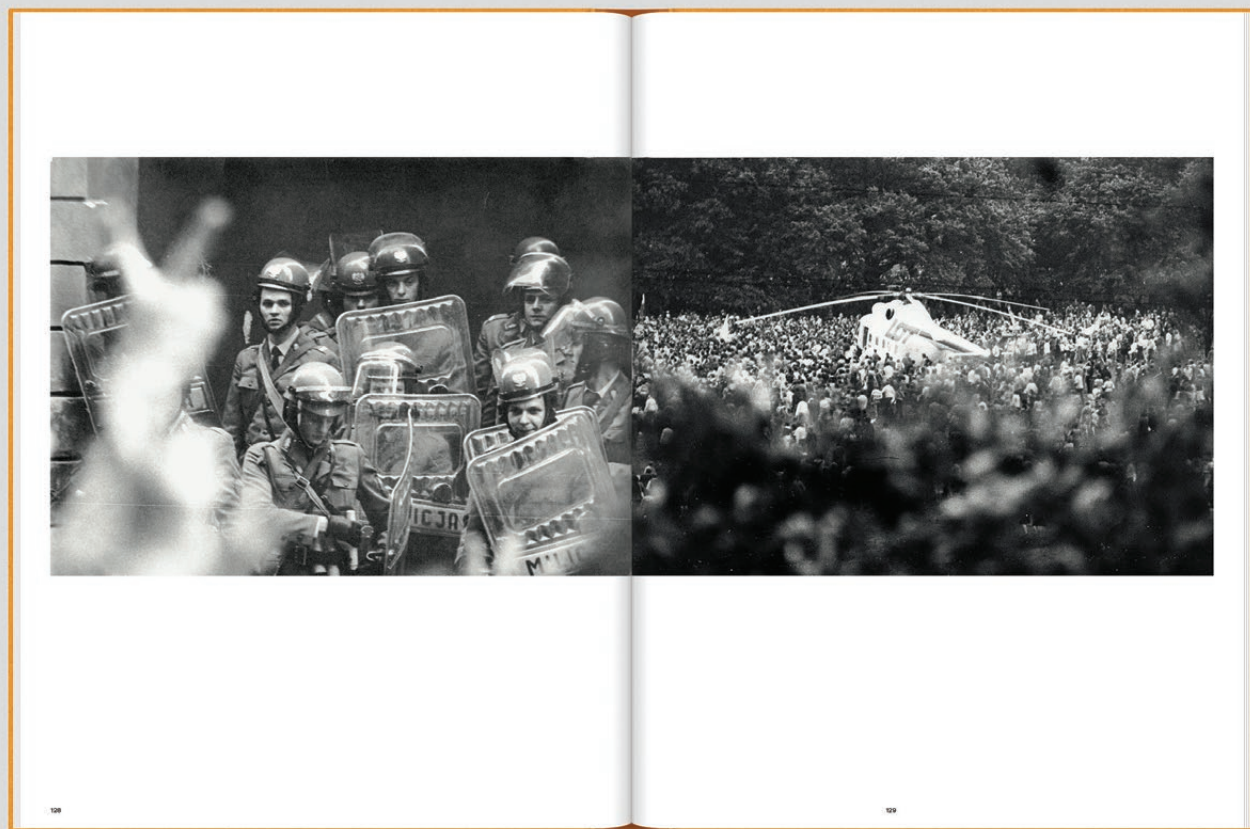




IV. Visual ethics now and then

Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.



The One-footed Roller Skater. A Visual Ethnography of Contemporary Cuba

Mădălina Cristea

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania
cristeamada2006@gmail.com

Cristea, Mădălina. 2021. "The One-footed Roller Skater. A Visual Ethnography of Contemporary Cuba."
Martor 26: 159-163.

ABSTRACT

This article deals with scarcity of goods, consumption, and the ethics of photographing scarcity of goods in contemporary Cuba. It is based on a six-month ethnographic research conducted in 2015 and 2018 respectively and shows some of the photographs I took during these two visits.

In the first part I discuss the scarcity and distribution of goods in and out of socialist environments, differences between capitalism and communism and non-traditional methods of consumption. How do desires of consumption impact people in contemporary communist Cuban society? What is the role of Cuban diaspora in sending so-called capitalist goods to Cuba? It also draws a connecting line between a state-controlled communist economy and specific forms of capitalist entrepreneurship, through the existence of a black market and the distribution of goods between people. The second part of the article questions my position in the field as an outsider who was gradually familiarized with the Cuban understanding of the world more generally, and of consumption specifically. How did locals react to photographs taken by foreigners like me? How can two children share one pair of roller skates and distribute their happiness? Making visible certain aspects of scarcity in contemporary communist Cuban society made me realize that photography has a profound ethical dimension.

KEYWORDS

Consumption; black-market; scarcity; transition; Romania; Cuba.



I was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1991. Only two years had passed since the highest echelon of the Communist Party fell from power in December 1989. It was only after my first visit to Cuba that I realized that communism was not totally over in 1989 and that communism and capitalism coexisted for a while in 1990s Romania (Angelescu et al. 2008). What was my first impression of Cuban society in 2018? Some people were looking to make a profit, others not really understanding the transformation taking place.

But before talking about Cuba, I want to tell you the story of how I perceived the 1990s in Romania—which is also a story of how I learned to speak Spanish. The first years after the fall of the communist regime were tumultuous for many different reasons. Transition meant, among other things, many hours of work for people who did not know what capitalism was and what were its limits. My parents literally worked from morning to night; people engaged in all sorts of businesses; inventiveness was the norm. When I look back at my childhood,

Martor 26/2021 - Visual Ethics after Communism

I cannot really say that I was raised by my own parents in the 1990s, but rather that, until the seventh grade, I grew up in another family made up of three pensioners whose house would open its doors for me after school until late in the night, when my parents would come and take me home. This “new” family who raised me consisted of two sisters, one of them married. They had no children of their own, which meant they had no previous knowledge of how to raise children. They allowed me to do whatever I wanted, including watching *telenovelas* (soap operas produced in Latin America) for hours on end. This was my first contact with Latin America. I continued my studies at Miguel de Cervantes High School of Bucharest, I then graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Communication and Public Relations from the National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, and I finished a master’s program at the same university, with a degree in Latin American Studies. In 2018, as part of this degree, I conducted research in Cuba for six months, as an Erasmus exchange student.

When I arrived in Cuba in 2015 and then a second time in 2018, as an MA Erasmus student, the country was dealing with shortages of a variety of goods: starting with meat and bread, for which one had to queue, going through Internet connection and as far as personal hygiene items—soap, shampoo, etc. What was interesting for me to observe was the Cubans’ passion for capitalist products—the missing variety of clothes, personal hygiene items, shoes, bags, etc. only obtainable from the black market, or from relatives or friends living abroad, especially in the US as the closest source geographically. From books or the accounts of other family members I knew that former socialist Romania had experienced the same situation of scarcity—from videotapes, blue jeans to beauty creams and food. But still, the lack of what I felt to be minimal consumption goods made me constantly ask myself questions about the connection

between consumption and happiness. As anthropologist Daniel Miller famously suggested, in the European affluent world, the exercise of shopping can be seen as a love declaration (Miller 1998: 15–23). In contrast with Miller, Perreira notes that the scarcity of Internet connection and other goods in “still existing socialist” Cuba does not impact on its people’s creativity (2011: 199).

While strolling around the streets of Havana one day, I could not help but notice two boys, aged seven or eight, sharing the same pair of roller skates. One was wearing the right boot, and the other was wearing the left one. This way, they both enjoyed skating with only one foot, the other foot just being used to break or accelerate.

I wanted to take a picture of both, but I was not able to. Taking out the phone camera felt a bit odd that day, and not only that day, for outsiders like myself.



Picture 1. Havana, Cuba, 2018. Photo credits: Mădălina Cristea.

In this case, the picture of the two children sharing a pair of skates for me represented a reminder of improvisation and creativity and of childhood in the first years after the



fall of the communist regime in Romania. Plastic colorful skates were rare, and they always came from abroad. In Cuba I noticed children playing a lot on the street, and it struck me to see that two children shared one pair of skates. Not many had such items. The fact that these came from abroad was important. Their happiness came also from sharing. Certain products were so scarce that neighbors and relatives shared and gifted each other different items—school uniforms, backpacks. Certain school items were shared between pupils who went to school in the morning and those who went in the afternoons. Speaking of shortage, I vividly remember one of the stories which I wrote down in my personal travel journal. The popular phrase the locals would use to explain how in the present conditions of the Cuban society, in a month one must choose between food and clothes is *No te alcanza para los dos* (It's not enough for both). Their facial expression was one of resignation. Cuba is a place where its citizens, although showing deep frustration and discomfort with their level of living, are, on the other hand, deep supporters of the communist revolution, as Martin Holbraad states (2013).

Cuba's government has tried to lower people's frustrations with the failing system through an average Internet connection and pretending that the illegal market does not exist in society, whilst blaming the shortages on the US embargo on Cuba. This is where the diaspora enters the scene, sending capitalist goods back home, which only reinforces and prolongs the existence of the black market. In some situations, locals even got to the point where they bartered popular items between themselves, money not being involved in the deal anymore.

So Internet connection was also lacking in Cuba. This lack impacted me on a high level. The connection was so poor that one could barely speak to family and friends at home. The *tarjetas* (cards) provided a limited one to five hours connection time, in the big hotels, some parks or important junctions in

the city, the only places available for a Wi-Fi connection. The card contained a scratch-off code and password, which you needed to authenticate yourself before connecting to the Internet. It could be bought in Etecsa shops, the only Internet and telephony provider on the island, which still operates without competition, at a cost of 1h = 1 CUC. Similar to any other service or product to be sold on the Cuban territory, for this one too you had to wait in line as part of a local's day-to-day struggle. Most likely, that is why the locals do not like to take walks in the sun, nor are they huge fans of spending a day at the beach—if they do, they make sure they're well covered, under an umbrella.

While there, I once posted on social media: "passing from capitalism to socialism isn't easy at all." This line echoed in the back of my head for the whole six months I spent in the Caribbean country; and it still does and will, for as long as I will remember this life experience. It constantly required me to get out of my comfort zone, not because it was a place I had never visited before, but because the Cuban society and culture were totally new compared to the way our lifestyles are built—based on different economical systems which impact the ethics and values of the society. Katherine Verdery described the socialist "economy of shortage" as an economy which depends on the managers' will. "Managers' right to move items of the socialist patrimony around at will contributed to one of the hallmarks of socialist political economies: widespread barter and trading of the goods necessary for production in socialism's economies of shortage" (Verdery 2004: 194). The state proves to be rigid, and people's ability to be entrepreneurs is allowed only partially to exist.

*

The second part of the article questions my position in the field as an outsider who was gradually familiarized with the Cuban



understanding of the world more generally, and of consumption specifically. Foreigners are seen as tourists who have money. The most developed branch of the Cuban economy nowadays is tourism. Based on my time observing the field, I found out from the locals that whoever worked in this field lived above average. Throughout my stays in Havana I came to the same conclusion: taxi drivers, entertainers in hotel areas, workers in hotels, restaurants, clubs, car rentals, etc., did have higher incomes than most fellow compatriots. A very important aspect which I noticed is that the services mentioned above were most likely designed for the foreigners—tourists that came with external funds— and a local could not even dream of affording them.

In Havana in February 2018, I was searching for a beauty salon to do my nails. The only possibility to do your nails in Cuba was to go to a beauty salon, since the shops did not sell nail polish. I entered one in *Habana Vieja* (the Old Town). The old town of the city is very popular among tourists looking for the Cuban experience. I would say it is the best place where you can trace and taste the real Cuban culture in the whole capital city.

I was welcomed as a *yuma*,¹ and for the services I received, I was requested triple the normal price. I agreed to pay it. I had no other option. In the salon, there were about seven local black women, with ages between twenty-three and fifty-five. For a while I decided that it would be better to be silent, as they looked somehow bothered by my presence, although I was going to pay 10 CUC by the end of the service. I felt like a lamb among the lions. They started including me in their conversation and accepted me little by little because, just like one said to another in my presence, “She speaks good Spanish.” This is one of the photographs that I did not take.

Later, in the coming months, I would find out that saying I am both *yuma* and a student would reduce the price of any service.



Picture 2. Havana, Cuba, 2018. Photo credits: Mădălina Cristea.

Similarly to the image of the two boys sharing a pair of skates, another image struck me while I was in the field. It was an image of derelict buildings crumbling in the street with no warning signs surrounding them. I took my camera out to take a picture of one such building. While I was taking the picture, I heard two passers-by commenting half laughing, half ironically and critically between each other. “This *yuma* takes pictures of things that are about to fall,” they said. I do not know what they thought about the falling walls and the shortage associated with them. What I did understand, on the other hand, is that we have different evaluation scales, based on the context we were raised in, education, culture, and also different ways in which images that are representative of communism, capitalism,

or the difficult transition from one system to another impress themselves on our minds. In my mind the image of the derelict building was fascinating because it showed lack of care—of the people, of the state towards its citizens.

Indeed, one needs to reflect on what kind of images one takes in the field and for what reason. As Mitchell explains in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*:

... images are like living organisms; living organisms are best described as things that

have desires (for example, appetites, needs, demands, drives); therefore, the question of what pictures want is inevitable. But there is also a historical dimension to the argument that needs to be made explicit. (...) If the phenomenon of the living image or animated icon is an anthropological universal, a feature of the fundamental ontology of images as such, how does it change over time, and from one culture to another? And why does it impress itself so forcibly on our attention at this specific historical moment? (Mitchell 2005: 11).



NOTES

1. *Yuma*, Cuban slang for “foreigner.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Angelescu, Șerban, Gabriela Cristea, Vlad Manoliu, Carmen Mihalache, Petre Popovăț. 2008. *Mărturii orale: Anii '90 și bucoreștenii* [Oral Histories: The 1990s and Bucharesters]. Bucharest: Paideia.
- Holbraad, Martin. 2013. “Revolución o muerte: Self-Sacrifice and the Ontology of Cuban Revolution.” *Ethnos* 79 (3): 365–87.
- Miller, Daniel. 1998. *A Theory of Shopping*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mitchell, William J. T. 2005. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pertierra, Anna. 2015. “Cuban Girls and Visual Media: Bodies and Practices of (still-) Socialist Consumerism.” *Continuum* 29: 1–11.
- Verdery, Katherine. 2004. “The Property Regime of Socialism.” *Conservation and Society* 2 (1): 189–198.