

## **From Heaven to Hell: Revolutionary Dreams and Dystopia in Zoé Valdés's *La nada cotidiana***

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The Cuban Revolution has frequently been characterized as a utopian project. Such a perspective stems from the socialist orientation of the Revolution and the frequent association of socialism with utopia. However, with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, which marked the end of economic aid from this former communist superpower and ally, Cuba entered a new, post-Soviet era of extreme economic crisis, known officially as the “Special Period in Times of Peace.” *La nada cotidiana* (1995) by Zoé Valdés is a critical portrayal of life in Cuba during the Special Period. Valdés’s novel shows how the state continues to disseminate its socialist, utopian ideology during this time of crisis in an attempt to salvage the Revolution; however, several of the novel’s main characters find the government’s ideology unconvincing, so they do not identify with it. Indeed, from the narrator’s perspective, the Revolution has failed and become a dystopian nightmare. With the threat of repression in the background, the Cuban people as depicted in the novel either feign their support for the Revolution or at least do not vocalize their opposition; as a result, the novel’s contemporary Cuba is a mere simulation of a truly revolutionary, utopian society. I argue that the apparent failure of the Cuban Revolution and the end of utopia for the island nation can be said to mark Cuba’s entrance into postmodernity and that one of the defining characteristics of the island’s postmodern condition is the idea of simulation.

The term *utopia* was first coined by English humanist Thomas More in his homonymous text of 1516, written during the European age of discovery, and many scholars believe that he envisioned his Utopia as situated somewhere in the American hemisphere. The Argentine essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada went even further and argued that the Taíno civilization of Cuba, as described by Pedro Mártir in his *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo* (chronicles of the New World, published between 1493-1526), was undoubtedly the basis for More’s *Utopia* (94) and that the latter was an “anticipatory vision” of Cuban society after the triumph of the Revolution (114-15). Mártir was one of Columbus’s traveling companions during the latter’s second voyage to the Americas, and he probably remained on one of the Caribbean islands until 1498 (Martínez Estrada 94). The third book of his *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo* was the only part of this work to be published before More’s *Utopia*, whereas the vast majority of the chronicles of the Indies were not published or did

not circulate until after the publication of More's text (Martínez Estrada 94-95). Since the *Décadas* presented a positive image of the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean and their civilization, the third book could have served as a model for More's *Utopia* (Martínez Estrada 91). Mártir's possible influence on More can be found in some of the correspondences between the two writers' texts, such as the abundance and egalitarian distribution of goods and resources as well as the absence (Cuba) or near absence (Utopia) of laws (Martínez Estrada 108-09).

Furthermore, according to Martínez Estrada's teleological view of history, More's *Utopia* is a "visión anticipada" of the historical evolution of Latin America and the course of its struggle for liberation (114). Indeed, Martínez Estrada claims that as Latin America entered the twentieth century, the continent was making concrete progress toward the realization of utopia, as evidenced by the Mexican Constitution of 1917 and the Cuban Revolution, and it was José Martí who provided the "eslabón de enlace" between Mártir's Cuba and the victory of Fidel Castro and his fellow Sierra Maestra rebels (Martínez Estrada 115, 118). Therefore, according to Martínez Estrada, *Utopia* "es mucho más que un relato imaginario. Vale decir que la Utopía de Moro es la Cuba de Pedro Mártir y la del Movimiento 26 de Julio" (122), the insurrectional movement of Fidel Castro.

However, contemporary politics in our so-called postmodern era seem to be marked by disenchantment with utopian projects. For those who equate socialism with utopia, this disenchantment seems either to have originated with or been magnified by the fall of the Soviet Union and the socialist governments of Eastern Europe. Indeed, it is the end of utopia and the marginalization of the grand narratives of human emancipation, such as Marxism and socialism, which are among the primary attributes of postmodernity.<sup>1</sup> In the Latin American context, such disillusionment with utopia became solidified in the 1990s with the end of the revolutionary option in Central America.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Cuba, after the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, the early 1960s was a time of "relative openness and utopian euphoria" (Howe 16). However, in the cultural realm, this euphoria eventually waned as the State imposed its own revolutionary criteria on literary and cultural production. More widespread disenchantment with the Revolution could be said to have begun with the Padilla affair in 1971, when Heberto Padilla, a well-known poet and journalist, was arrested and allegedly tortured for having published a "counterrevolutionary" collection of poems entitled *Fuera del juego* (Howe 25). He was later coerced into giving a public confession, during which he denounced his own hostility and that of other intellectuals toward the Revolution (25). In response to Padilla's treatment, foreign left-wing intellectuals protested the government's actions, and some withdrew their support for the Revolution (Minaya 81). This international scandal occurred at the beginning of the so-called "quinquenio gris," a five-year period from 1970-75 marked by an intensified crack-down on writers, intellectuals, and artists (Howe 62). It

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<sup>1</sup> As John Beverley has observed, "One of the things that could be said to define postmodernity as such is the collapse of communism" (47).

<sup>2</sup> The presidency of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and his political program of "21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism" as well as the recent rise to power of other left-wing governments in Latin America may have moderated, if only temporarily, such political disillusionment in the region as it entered the twenty-first century.

seemed that the postmodern disenchantment with utopia and the grand narrative of Marxism had begun to penetrate Cuban territory in this decade.

A more contemporary perspective on the Cuban utopian experiment is presented in Valdés's novel *La nada cotidiana*. This novel inscribes itself within the contemporary debate on utopia and socialism with its opening line, "Ella viene de una isla que quiso construir el paraíso" (15). The use of the preterite ("quiso") already suggests the narrator's perspective on contemporary Cuba: Cuba has failed to construct a utopian paradise, the primary goal of the Revolution. *La nada cotidiana* is the story of Yocandra, a young woman who was born in the year that the Revolution triumphed (1959), a year of euphoria and promise for the future generations of Cubans who were to experience the fruits of the Revolution. Instead, however, Yocandra works as an editor of a literary magazine that has not been published for some time due to the economic problems and shortages that Cuba has been facing during the "Special Period." Yocandra's life has become a monotonous routine. As she herself states, "Hace dos años que hago lo mismo todos los días: pedalear de mi casa a la oficina, marcar la tarjeta, sentarme en el buró, leer algunas revistas extranjeras que continúan llegando con dos y tres meses o años de retraso, y pensar en las musarañas" (30). She narrates her relationship with two men, identified only by their nicknames, "el Traidor" and "el Nihilista." Other unnamed characters appear throughout the story, such as "la Gusana," "el Lince," and the "militonta." Furthermore, Yocandra speaks of the extreme economic problems—scarcity of food, power blackouts, etc.—that the Cuban people face. Of course, those who actively support the system face less hardship than others. All the while, Yocandra's life has consisted of "going through the motions." In other words, her life has become a daily emptiness, a quotidian nothingness or "nada cotidiana" in which ubiquitous revolutionary slogans belie or mask the underlying reality, which is not that far beneath the surface. As she herself says, "¿Cuánto no nos jodieron con 'estamos construyendo un mundo mejor'? ¿Dónde está que no lo veo?" (95).

This novel represents Valdés's own highly critical views of the Cuban regime and the Revolution. Valdés is a dissident who left Cuba in 1995 to take up residence in Paris. In an interview with Enrico Mario Santí, she comments on the many problems she experienced or witnessed in Cuba before she left: the lack of aspirin, tampons, and chocolate; the tragedy of the "balseros" who fled Cuba for the United States and frequently died in the attempt; and the people's obligation to adhere blindly to the State's ideology as well as their duty to remain "combative" like Che Guevara. *La nada cotidiana* portrays the Cuban reality of the Special Period that Valdés personally experienced, which Santí points out in the following comment: "uno de los elementos más interesantes acerca de *La nada cotidiana* . . . es este deseo de dar un testimonio, político, ideológico, histórico, acerca de esta realidad que has vivido. Hay una necesidad de hacer no sólo literatura sino de nombrar la realidad tal como la ve no un personaje, sino tú misma" (407).

In the novel, Yocandra's experiences are largely a representation and denunciation of the daily reality—*la nada cotidiana*—of Cuban life. Valdés's novels include frequent depictions of fornication and the desperate measures to which her compatriots resort in order to cope with the economic problems of the Special Period (Howe 63). For this reason, many Cuban intellectuals on the island have nicknamed her "Soez" (meaning "vile" or "coarse") Valdés and have called her work "cheap, opportunistic trash" (Howe 63). Others have criticized the quality of her work in response to her "savvy manipulation of the

literary market,” but José Quiroga believes that such criticism “reveal[s] a bias that counterposes market success and literary quality” (136). Valdés herself, in her interview with Santí, provides the following illuminating commentary on the criticism that her work is simplistic:

SANTÍ. . . para regresar un poco a la redacción de la novela en Cuba: evidentemente, tú agarras una serie de personajes, una serie de “tipos”. Una de las cosas más interesantes de tus personajes es que a pesar de que tienen una gran vida imaginaria (mucho delirio, mucha desilusión) son personajes alegóricos. Es decir, no tienen nombres como Pepe, María o Teresa, sino etiquetas, como el Traidor, el Nihilista, la Gusana, el Lince, etcétera.

VALDÉS. Eso es muy importante. Han salido dos críticas negativas al respecto. Dicen que son personajes maniqueos, caricaturescos. Lo cierto es que lo hice con toda intención. Quise marcar la caricatura y el maniqueísmo [*sic*] de los personajes porque provienen de una realidad caricaturesca y maniquea. Eso [*sic*] son los personajes que produce esa sociedad. (406)

Valdés’s response to her critics underscores the symbolic and allegorical nature of this particular novel, which represents the “realidad caricaturesca y maniquea” of the Cuban nation through its characters.

It was Fredric Jameson who famously argued that all Third-World literary texts are national allegories. This idea has been criticized by post-colonial scholars who view Jameson’s theory as essentialist and reductionist. Marxist critic Neil Larsen acknowledges the problematic nature of Jameson’s sweeping generalizations, but he does find it plausible to posit an underlying structural tendency in Third-World literature to represent the nation allegorically (19). In his book *Determinations*, Larsen expands on recent theories of nation and narration and concludes that those Third-World texts that can be considered national allegories often assume the form of biography. Such novels tell the life story of the protagonist or hero, who may be different from other people; however, when considered as an individual in the abstract, the hero is interchangeable with his or her fellow compatriots who comprise the modern nation (180). In addition, Larsen asserts, the hero’s world, or more specifically, the “scope of the hero’s possible experiences,” is framed by the space of the *nation* (180). For this reason, Larsen argues, the biographical novel is able to represent the nation. In Valdés’s novel, the link between “hero” and nation is initially underscored by the protagonist’s original name, Patria, which means “fatherland” (i.e., “nation”).

*La nada cotidiana*, as the biography of its protagonist Patria/Yocandra, is clearly an allegorical representation of Cuba during the Special Period. From Yocandra’s perspective, life in Cuba is a quotidian nothingness that at best amounts to a mere simulation of a truly revolutionary, socialist society. The concept of simulation in postmodern culture generally refers to the theories of Jean Baudrillard, but his analyses are centered on highly developed capitalist societies of which Cuba is not a primary model. Nevertheless, I will argue that Yocandra’s perception of reality makes Baudrillard’s notion of simulation highly apropos in the Cuban context and that Cuban society can be viewed as postmodern in this sense.

Of course, the relevance of the concept of postmodernism to the Cuba of the Special Period is questionable, especially given the island nation’s attempt to cling to its utopian, revolutionary project during this time. Writing in the late 1990s, Marilyn Miller points out that, “Como sigue vigente tanto la política marxista como el esfuerzo de mantener en lo posible la soberanía económica de Cuba, el ‘postmodernismo’ . . . ha aparecido

indudablemente con cara de enemigo para algunos en la isla” (170). One of the more important works on postmodernism in Cuba is Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island*, which is actually a comprehensive study of the entire Caribbean region from a postmodern perspective. In his view, the “supersyncretism,” “chaos,” and “entropy”<sup>3</sup> of the Caribbean and Caribbean culture can be considered postmodern traits in the sense that they are resistant to the ordering impulses and reductionism of modern master narratives that would claim to represent Caribbean culture and history. Indeed, these traits have characterized the region since the colonial era, thereby making the archipelago postmodern *avant la lettre*.

A briefer engagement with the issue of postmodernism in Cuba is undertaken by Ruth Behar in her discussion of “post-utopia” on the island. From her point of view, the “Special Period” signifies that the Cuban utopia is in crisis and has reached the stage of “post-utopia.” Behar considers this “post-utopia” to be a “translation into Cuban of the idea of postmodernity” (135). Another critic, Catherine Davies, suggests that it is possible to argue that Cuba has crossed the postmodern threshold twice: first, when the grand narrative of Marxism supplanted the grand narrative of capitalism with the Revolution, and second, when various forms of capitalism returned to the island during the Special Period (75). Furthermore, Davies believes that postmodernity is a particularly applicable concept to the current political situation in Cuba now that Marxism has lost its legitimacy (76). In the realm of literature and film, Davies suggests that Cuban postmodernism does not involve simply opposition to the Marxist grand narrative of the state but also a level of deconstruction, parody, or satire of the various modalities of opposition adopted by the characters (76-77). Therefore, although postmodernism is frequently associated with the representation of previously marginalized subjectivities (Davies 84), Gutiérrez Alea's *Fresa y chocolate*, whose gay character challenges the ideology of the Revolution, cannot be considered postmodern (Davies 77). On the other hand, Daniel Díaz Torres's satire of the Cuban Revolution, *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas*, which also presents the protagonist's opposition as “ludicrous and distasteful,” is quintessentially postmodern in Davies's view (77).

In *La nada cotidiana*, the roles of language and discourse are fundamental to an understanding of postmodernism in Cuba. In contemporary Cuba, discourse and language are omnipresent, which has led Iván de la Nuez to describe the island as “[u]n mundo en el que el silencio aparece no por una ausencia de palabras, sino por un exceso de éstas” (70). Much of Cuba's discourse and language is highly ideological, especially from a North American perspective. Advertising, itself a form of ideology, has been displaced on the island since the Revolution by ubiquitous revolutionary mottos, slogans, and images on billboards and walls. There are many references in the novel to such slogans, e.g., “Estamos construyendo un mundo mejor” (95), “Morir por la patria es vivir” (15), and “Seremos como el Che” (117). In other parts of the text, there are more general references to ideological speech and slogans, such as “los discursos demagógicos” (100), “la enfermedad de los discursos” (88), and “consignas idiotas” (42). Even an object such as the Cuban flag, placed by Che on Yocandra's mother's pregnant belly, becomes an ideological sign of

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<sup>3</sup> These concepts and terms [“supersyncretism,” “chaos,” and “entropy” (as well as “entropic”)] are used by Benítez-Rojo in various parts of his book to describe the Caribbean and Caribbean culture.

revolutionary nationalism. And it should not be overlooked that this moment in the novel occurs precisely when her mother is listening to a *speech* by Fidel in the Plaza of the Revolution. Finally, another significant medium of ideology is state television programming: whereas Yocandra is able to gain access to North American TV through a neighbor, who bought a parabolic antenna, the majority of Cubans are only able to see Cuban state TV. The prevalence of revolutionary slogans and other signs is a concerted effort to manufacture a specifically revolutionary reality.

Louis Althusser has elaborated a sophisticated theory of how ideology works in modern society. According to Althusser's definition, "Ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). Furthermore, for the most part, we as subjects are unable to recognize ideology as *ideology*. In Althusser's words,

It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are "obviousnesses") obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize* and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the "still, small voice of conscience"): "That's obvious! That's right! That's true!" (172; emphasis in original)<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, we as individuals " 'recognize' the existing state of affairs (*das Bestehende*), that 'it really is true that it is so and not otherwise' " (181). This explains how the state's ideology is able to produce compliant subjects.

Althusser, as a Marxist, was attempting to describe the functioning of ideology in a capitalist society, and therefore, it is perhaps questionable to apply his concept of ideology to an ostensibly Marxist-Leninist revolutionary state. Nevertheless, Althusser believed that ideology, as a "device which guarantees the cohesion of social formations of any sort," would continue to exist in societies that managed to overthrow the capitalist state and replace it with socialism (Smith 15). Therefore, Althusser's theory of ideology is a useful point of departure for a consideration of the function of ideology in *La nada cotidiana*. Furthermore, Althusser's concept of interpellation—the process by which the state attempts to subject the people to its ideology—is clearly at work in contemporary Cuba and in the novel *La nada cotidiana*, even though the state is not always successful, as I explain below.

The failures of the state's ideology and its interpellation of the Cuban people are indicated by the observations and comments of the novel's characters. For example, the protagonist and several of her friends contend that the ideology of the Revolution has manufactured an "impuesta realidad" (107) and that so many revolutionary slogans are "falsificador[es] de la vida" (162), i.e., they falsify or misrepresent life as it is. Such a reaction suggests that it is necessary to modify Althusser's concept of ideology by treating it as what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "authoritative discourse." According to Bakhtin, "[t]he authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it

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<sup>4</sup> All further italicized or emphasized words and phrases in this paper that appear in quotations from other sources are already emphasized in the original source, except where indicated by the phrase "emphasis added."

with its authority already fused to it" (342). Furthermore, "[i]t is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands out unconditional allegiance" (343). Understanding ideology as authoritative discourse allows for the possibility of a subject who does not publicly oppose the Revolution's ideology even when he or she is not persuaded by it. This is a scenario to which I will return shortly.

The focalizer of this novel, Yocandra, presents to the implied reader a reality that simulates the society envisioned by revolutionary discourse. The concept of simulation is one of the dominant motifs in this novel. For example, Yocandra cannot publish her literary magazine due to the "problemas materiales que enfrenta el país" and the "periodo especial" (30). So she goes to work everyday, punches her time card, and reads foreign magazines and daydreams while sitting at her desk. In other words, she goes through the motions of working even though there is no work. Toward the end of the novel, she refers to her professional life as her "yo ficticio" (162). Also, Yocandra receives a university diploma in physical education despite attending only the first three weeks of class. Her older boyfriend, through his connections with government functionaries, was able to buy the documents to attest to her status as a model student. This same boyfriend, known as "el Traidor," pretended to be her senior professor and would visit her parents monthly to inform them of her excellent progress in school. "El Traidor" and Yocandra had prepared a "guión perfecto"—once again, the importance of discourse—to convince her parents that she was a top student and a party militant (51). She even had a counterfeit party membership card, another sign that she was a revolutionary. For his part, "el Traidor" would tell Yocandra stories that portrayed him as "un Rambo del comunismo" and "un machista leninista" (59). Yocandra, however, never believed any of these stories. Her implication, then, is that "el Traidor" simply simulated being a true revolutionary. Finally, at the end of the novel, while she vents her pain, Yocandra refers to her "fictitious me" who attends embassy receptions, assemblies, general meetings, etc., where she keeps her mouth shut, and how some Cubans "pretenden que vomites hasta la madre que te parió a cambio de cualquier distinción entregada a tu familia después de muerta" (162). At this point, her despair reaches its peak, and in reaction to her simulated life, a voice within her cries out and exclaims: "¡Pero ésa no es mi vida, no soy yo!" (162). She adds, "Sin embargo, *así vives. Así te manifiestas*. Es tu retrato hablado. ¿Y no ven, coño, cómo voy perdiendo lo más heroico del hombre, la vida misma, a medida que me incorporo a esas filas de contentos, a los batallones de condecorados, a los que viven porque mueren por cualquier consigna falsificadora de la vida? ¿No ven que me he quedado sin amigos?" (162; emphasis added).

Here, I am arguing that this recurring idea of simulation suggests the possibility of viewing contemporary Cuban society as postmodern. In socialist Cuba, slogans, signs, and discourse are ubiquitous. But according to Yocandra, Cuba is a society in which socialism has failed, a society in which revolutionary discourse and signs have no apparent referent. Or as Yocandra puts it, "¿Cuánto no nos jodieron con 'estamos construyendo un mundo mejor'? ¿Dónde está que no lo veo?" (95). This comment recalls Baudrillard's definition of postmodern simulation as the "generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (*Simulations* 2). In the postmodern era, the sign has no relation to reality. This is the fourth stage in Baudrillard's genealogy of the sign or image. In his essay, "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard states:

This would be the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (*Simulations*

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This last phase of the image or sign corresponds to the third-order of simulacra that he discusses in his essay, “The Orders of Simulacra” (Hegarty 51).<sup>5</sup>

The novel also echoes Baudrillard’s analysis of postmodern simulation in a scene that involves a psychiatric hospital. When Yocandra’s father, an important labor leader and Communist party official, is reprimanded by the authorities for predicting that the nation would fail to achieve its goal of a ten million-ton sugarcane harvest in 1970, he goes crazy. Wandering around the city, he finds himself at one point outside the gates of a psychiatric hospital, and grabbing the bars, he yells for them to get him out of there. He apparently believes that the truly insane people are those living around him and passing by him *outside* the hospital and that the city streets are the cells of a mental institution. His apparent confusion between the inside and the outside of the psychiatric hospital (i.e., between who is crazy and who is not) is reminiscent of Baudrillard’s interpretation of the function of Disneyland in the United States and of prisons in contemporary society. Baudrillard argues that both Disneyland and prisons are implicated in postmodern simulation because they conceal the fact that the entire United States is Disneyland and that all of society is carceral, respectively (*Simulations* 25). Similarly, the psychiatric hospital in *La nada cotidiana* serves to cover up the insanity of Cuban society outside its gates, especially the insanity of the Cuban Revolution. In other words, the hospital provides the perfect cover for the simulation of a sane, rational, and free revolutionary society.

In his essay on the “end of the social,” Baudrillard makes a connection between socialism and the third-order simulacra of postmodernism. According to him,

The social, if it existed with second-order simulacra, no longer even has the opportunity to be produced with third-order ones: from the beginning it is trapped in its own “blown up” and desperate staging. . . . [At this stage,] the history of the social will never have had time to lead to revolution: it will have been outstripped by *signs* of the social and of revolution. The social will never have had time to lead to socialism, it will have been short-circuited by the hypersocial, by the hyperreality of the social (*but perhaps socialism is no more than this?*). (*In the Shadow* 85; emphasis added)

Here, Baudrillard links postmodern hyperreality and third-order simulacra (the “signs” of the revolution) to the failure of socialism in our time. In this sense, the Cuba of *La nada cotidiana* is postmodern, and the concept of simulation is directly tied to the failure or shortcomings of Cuban socialism. Furthermore, this hypersocial or hyperreality—so involved in “its own ‘blown up’ and desperate staging” (Baudrillard, *In the Shadow* 85)—is what produces characters such as the “militonta,” a caricature of the militant Cuban

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<sup>5</sup> The second and third phases of the image correspond to the first order and the second order of simulacra, respectively (Hegarty 51).

revolutionary, and for that matter, “el Traidor,” the somewhat stereotypical macho revolutionary.

However, regardless of the arguments above, the hyperreality of Cuban society may not correspond precisely to the hyperreality and simulation that Baudrillard believes characterizes postmodernity proper. Baudrillard argues that in contemporary society, the reality principle no longer applies, because postmodern simulation eliminates the distinction between the real and the imaginary, between true and false (*Simulations* 5). Therefore, postmodernity is an era beyond ideology, according to the sense of the term used by Baudrillard: a “false representation of reality” (*Simulations* 25). However, in the case of *La nada cotidiana*, Yocandra and her friends and acquaintances *can* distinguish between true and false, between reality and ideology. Yocandra’s critique of the government’s ideology makes this abundantly clear. Accordingly, one could argue that the simulation of socialism in Cuba as portrayed in the novel might more adequately correspond to an earlier stage of simulation, prior to postmodernism, of the various forms of simulation that Baudrillard discusses in his work.

Furthermore, in his *Postmodernist Culture*, Steven Connor analyzes Baudrillard’s declaration of the end of the social and points out that

. . . the more the actuality of the ‘social’ vanishes from view, the greater is the distance between these simulacra and the dumb indifference of the ‘masses’ who were traditionally held to embody the social. In other words, this looks like a regression from the final stage of Baudrillard’s four-stage genealogy [of the image] to an *earlier* stage, in which signs—the representations of the social—strive to mask the fact of an emptiness, the masses’ refusal to *be* the social in the ways required of them by opinion polls, referenda and revolutionary movements. (59; emphasis added)

In short, the masses “refus[e] to come together except as simulation” (Connor 59). In Connor’s view, this form of simulation more accurately corresponds to the type of image or sign that, in Baudrillard’s words, “masks the *absence* of a basic reality” (*Simulations* 11), and this stage of the image is *prior* to the final stage that characterizes third-order, postmodern simulacra. Thus, Connor’s analysis suggests that there may be a degree of ambiguity or contradiction in Baudrillard’s work here, even though Baudrillard views the simulation of the social, or the hyperreality of the social, as characteristic of the postmodern era.

Nevertheless, the simulation of socialism and revolution in the novel point to the failure of the Marxist version of modernity’s grand narratives of human emancipation on the island and in this sense can be said to signal Cuba’s entry into postmodernity. Therefore, regardless of whether or not the Cuban Revolution is a proper postmodern simulation, I would argue that the concept of simulation is a useful trope to understand the failure of socialism and ideology in Cuba—in short, Cuba’s postmodern condition.

In “Los otros signos de la isla,” Ernesto Hernández Busto seeks to formulate “la posibilidad de una condición posmoderna” in Cuba by employing an argument analogous to the one I have presented above. He states that “cualquier sociedad que haya ensayado el paradigma moderno puede haber arribado a su crisis o fracaso iniciando una *condición post* que no siempre es visible desde la perspectiva del discurso dominante,” and in Cuba, it is “la política la que nos arroja definitivamente al fracaso del proyecto de modernidad” (26).

Contemporary Cuban politics “se funda en patrones morales para ir armando el *teatro* político de la demagogia incesante” (26; emphasis added). According to Hernández Busto, the crisis in revolutionary Cuba began in the 1980s due to the teleological rationality of the Revolution, which supposedly guaranteed that the Revolution was marching toward a happy ending that was nevertheless constantly deferred. As a result, “se hizo visible . . . la *teatralidad* inherente a la crisis de la representación política” (26; emphasis added), and the Revolution became an “espectáculo institucional” (27). The image of the Revolution as only theater and show, which for Hernández Busto constitutes a “postmodern condition,” approximates the Baudrillardian analysis here of the Revolution as postmodern simulation.

Finally, one could argue that Valdés intended to present a reading of revolutionary Cuba as postmodern and “hyperreal.” First of all, one of Valdés’s characters is reading a book by Lyotard, specifically referred to in the novel as the French philosopher of postmodernism. In addition, although Baudrillard’s name is not mentioned, the narrator uses such words as “hiperrealista” (166), “hipercanto,” and “hipervivo” (170), all in the last chapter, a perhaps not-so-subtle reference to Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality and the postmodern. In short, it seems that the novel incorporates a vulgar or popular understanding of Baudrillard and postmodern theory for the aesthetic purpose of making an analogy between what could loosely be called the “hyperreality” of revolutionary Cuban society and Baudrillard’s postmodern simulacra.

Of course, Yocandra offers a highly critical interpretation of Cuban (hyper)reality. That she is so virulently “counterrevolutionary” indicates, as I have previously suggested, that there has been a break down in the process of interpellation of the subject in Cuban society. Interpellation, as Althusser says, is the operation by which ideology “‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)” (174). But all individuals in Althusser’s theory are “*always already*” subjects (172); they are not *waiting* for an act of interpellation as the terms “recruit” or “transform” might indicate.

*La nada cotidiana* provides some examples of interpellation at work. First of all, Yocandra at one point in the novel compares revolutionary society with the Inquisition, and declares that “somos los monjes de una obediencia ciega” (114). “El cuerpo respond[ía] obediente al interrogatorio de las circunstancias. Porque para cada persona o cosa teníamos que tener un rostro, una respuesta. Una carne adobada. Preguntar no estaba permitido” (114). Here Yocandra is describing interpellation as a form of “interrogatorio,” which recalls one of the French definitions of this term: “being taken in by the police for questioning” (Macey). The purpose of such questioning is to ensure the continued subjection of the individual to the state’s ideology.

Another example of interpellation at work can be found in the activities of the young Cuban *pioneros*, the socialist counterpart to the Boy Scouts. Both of these organizations can be regarded as what Althusser calls “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs) due to the way in which they transmit ideology to today’s youth. Yocandra’s friend, “la Gusana,” refers to how the *pioneros* march through the streets chanting, “¡Dame la F, dame la I, dame la D... etcétera!” (100), spelling out Fidel Castro’s first name and thereby expressing their support for their leader. In this way, the youngsters are “inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs” (Althusser 181). This demonstrates the performative component of

ideology according to which subjects naturally exhibit their adherence to the ideology of the State.

Perhaps the best example of interpellation and subjection to ideology in the novel occurs at Yocandra's birth. When asked for a name for the baby, the father decides upon "Patria." Of course, the word "patria," or "fatherland," in Cuba is a highly ideological signifier that carries the connotation of revolutionary nationalism. One thinks of the famous slogan "Patria o muerte" (169). In a sense, then, Yocandra's identity is literally made revolutionary, and any attempt out on the street to "hail" her, to use Althusser's term, by calling out her name always already subjects her to a revolutionary position in any dialogue with a friend or *compañero*. Analogously, one could argue that the use of the word *compañero/a* has a similar effect, reminding the subject of her duty to the revolutionary causes of the government.

Of course, Yocandra is a rebel and decides to change her name at the age of sixteen because her lover "el Traidor" laughs at it when she first introduces herself to him. At the very beginning of her life, Yocandra even "refuses" to be born on the first Labor Day of the Revolution in 1959, and instead waits until two minutes into the next day (Fornet 15). If subjects usually "work by themselves" and "(freely) accept [their] subjection" (Althusser 181-82), then how does such rebellion occur on the part of the novel's characters? Althusser does allow for "'bad subjects' who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus" (181), which should be distinguished from the ISAs mentioned previously. I have already suggested the possibility of regarding ideology in the Cuban context as a form of what Bakhtin calls authoritative discourse, which is reinforced with varying degrees of coercion. However, I would like to consider here the work of Michel Pêcheux, who has arguably developed a more nuanced and complete theory of resistance to state ideology. Pêcheux argues that the constitution of the subject can follow three different modalities: "identification," "counteridentification," and "disidentification." Identification is essentially the process that Althusser describes. However, Pêcheux posits the possibility of a "bad subject," which is a subject "who 'turns against' the *universal subject* by 'taking up a position' which now consists of a *separation* (distantiation, doubt, interrogation, challenge, revolt...) *with respect to what the 'universal Subject' 'gives him to think'*" (157). This "produces the philosophical and political forms of *the discourse-against* (i.e., *counter-discourse*)" (157). Yocandra is the prototype of this "bad subject." Pêcheux also allows for a more radical possibility than Althusser allows, which Pêcheux calls "disidentification." This possibility "constitutes a *working* (transformation-displacement) *of the subject-form* and not just its *abolition*" (159). The practice of disidentification involves the "'overthrow-rearrangement' of the complex of ideological formations (and of the discursive formations which are imbricated with them)," resulting in an "*identification with the political organisations 'of a new type'*" (159).<sup>6</sup> Disidentification, however, does not present itself in Valdés's novel.

Clearly, then, *La nada cotidiana* is the portrayal of the anguish of a subject who counteridentifies with the Revolution. For Yocandra, the utopia promised by the Revolution

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<sup>6</sup> Pêcheux's example of disidentification comes from the era of the First World War, when communism or Marxism-Leninism offered a disidentificatory alternative to the binary ideological opposition of war versus peace (168-70).

has become a dystopia. Yocandra personifies the postmodern disillusionment with totalizing grand narratives such as the Marxism-Leninism of the Cuban government. Cuba's Revolution is a theatrical farce with an unhappy ending. The quasi-Baudrillardian, postmodern view I have proposed here also suggests an interpretation of the novel's title. Beneath all the revolutionary discourse—the “desperate staging” of the Revolution, the myriad signifiers with no referent—there is simply nothing, a daily nothingness. Although this novel would appear to be bold and radical, Pêcheux warns us that this might not be the case. From Pêcheux's perspective, counteridentification can only serve to reinforce the binarism that informs the crisis in and around Cuba. As José Esteban Muñoz so aptly puts it, the binary opposition of identification-counteridentification creates a “structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of ‘counterdetermination’ ” (11). A useful analogy that I would like to propose is that of the Manichean nature of the opposition between the Cuban government and the Cuban exiles of Miami. Some would say that the stubborn insistence by the latter on maintaining the embargo against the island simply works to reinforce a binarism that only serves to maintain Fidel (and now Raúl) Castro in power: in this way, Raúl/Fidel Castro can divert attention from the problems at home to the embargo, which serves as a scapegoat for these same problems. This particular political issue, however, is beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, it does suggest that only a disidentificatory novel could undermine the present government on the island.

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