The reactions generated by the televised homages in early 2006 to Luis Pavón, Jorge Serquera, and Armando Quesada—deposed officials who had occupied important posts in the Cuban cultural hierarchy—may be seen as part of the country’s post-Soviet experience. Three decades after they were fired, the former leaders aroused a heated polemic on Cuba’s cultural policy in the 1970s. Prestigious intellectuals Antón Arrufat, Senel Paz, Miguel Barnet, Reynaldo González, and Desiderio Navarro began an email exchange into which, within days, many more writers and artists from several generations entered. A formal complaint was lodged with the Ministry of Culture and a colloquium on the five-year gray period of Cuban culture (1971–1976) was organized at the Casa de las Américas. Cuban publications in exile followed the collective protest carefully, although they also criticized several Cuban intellectuals, whom they accused of limiting themselves to timorous attacks on figures with no real political influence within Cuba today. As many observed, Pavón and company—diabolical though they may have been—were no more than bureaucrats, merely names that stood for a much vaster system marked by the imposition of Soviet models on the conduct of cultural activities.

In what sense is the reaction by Cuban intellectuals part of the post-Soviet experience? Demonizing the 1970s is a way of classifying the Soviet experience as something that has been overcome, encapsulated in a distant past. Those who spearheaded the protest did little more than reiterate a discourse that has become increasingly institutionalized. The belief that the oppressive decade has been left behind and that present-day cultural production—from visual arts and literature to, more recently, theater and cinema—enjoys an admirable openness, is part of the post-Soviet discourse endorsed by Cuba’s cultural
institutions themselves. It is repeated by figures directly linked to the Cuban government, such as Silvio Rodriguez, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Miguel Barnet, and others. Thus the intellectuals’ protest does appear rather timid. It seems to add little substance and to remain within the margins of an official discourse initiated at a moment roughly coinciding, historically, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the cooling of relations between Cuba and the USSR. The stir caused by the televised homages tends to indicate that in the post-Soviet experience, everything Soviet—reduced to a cohort of sinister bureaucrats—has become a scapegoat, allowing more recent atrocities to remain in the shadows. Nonetheless, the resistance had an inflammatory quality, and the cultural authorities reluctantly moved to shut down the email exchange. Criticism of the five-year gray period—both within and outside Cuba—immediately generated a dialogue on the current state of affairs. The programs on Pavón, Quesada, and Serquera diverted attention away from the persistence of Soviet models in contemporary Cuban society. The debate over cultural policy in the early 1970s was so highly charged precisely because beyond the realm of visual arts and literature, Soviet influence remains, even today, deeply rooted in contemporary Cuba. There is no question that the early 1970s were a time of extremely intense tightening of ties with the USSR, but more than the remaining vestiges, Lada cars, prefab buildings, and outmoded appliances, Soviet patterns permeate Cuban society in countless manifestations: the inefficiency of enterprises, unanimity within government assemblies, triumphalist slogans, the rhetoric of the press, bureaucracy, surveillance systems, labor relations, and many other things are still based on Soviet models or have inherited some of their traits. Certain emails in the discourse, such as those written by filmmaker Enrique Colina and art critic Orlando Hernández, emphasize the need for profound social transformations precisely in these structures that still bear the stamp of prior Soviet models.

The literary and artistic realm—especially the area of visual arts—remains relatively marginalized and even in opposition to these social structures. Whereas Cuba’s artistic creators can describe the gray period as an ignominious era belonging to the past, journalists, television commentators, and opposition politicians are quite a bit more reserved about expressing such opinions. The latter are not voices authorized to speak. For them, it is barely permissible to pronounce aloud words like “gray period,” whereas critic Desiderio Navarro, in his essay “In Media Res Pública,” considers the term a euphemism. Literature and visual art in Cuba today, with their ambivalences toward power, their moral claims, and the occasional “rebel artist,” must play by the rules of the game that tend to institutionalize social