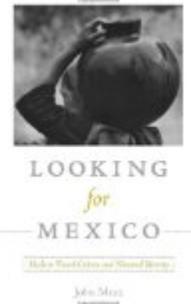


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The Search for Mexican Identity in Photographic and Filmic Images, 1840-2007

An image from the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada* in 2006 crystallizes the challenges of locating or defining modern Mexican identity. In the photograph by Mexican photographer Federico Gama, a young man is captured at an oblique angle, in determined stride, a semi-squint on his face as if challenging the photographer's gaze. A telephoto lens records the explosion of color and imagery that comprise the young man's attire, which bears a number of signifiers of *Mexicanidad* (Mexicaness): the religious iconography of the Marian image on his t-shirt; a countercultural appropriation of the colors of the Mexican flag, or tri; the reappearance of Guadalupe on his cholo-style bandana; various piercings and tattoos; a cowry-shell necklace; and the military-inspired urban style of his backpack. The photograph presents not only the problems one encounters in isolating Mexican national identity, but also the often-problematic relationship between photographer and subject that is at the heart of visual studies.

Jorge Ricardo, in the photograph's accompanying article, attempts to resolve the problem with the "classification" of a new Mexicanidad, citing the unwieldy *mazahualcholoeskatopunk*, a cobbled-together term taken from the exhibition where Gama's photograph appeared, and meant to capture disparate elements of a youth-driven counterculture, an ironic patriotism, the imported and hybridized influences from abroad, rural-to-urban migration, iconic religious imagery, and the connection to an Amerindian past. Meanwhile, the youth's facial

expression reminds the viewer that photography may be cultural appropriation at best, and cultural predation at worst: the photographer "captures" his subject for his own selfish and subjective reasons. The photograph, however, is indicative of Mexico's rich visual color palette from which strokes both broad and fine, when applied, evoke the nation's political history, resulting in a riotous image. The historian of Mexican visual culture faces an arduous task: first, to locate the document within Mexico's often tumultuous historical context, and second, to find the words that might convey the sense of reality that visual images suggest so effectively.[1]

John Mraz, research professor at the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, has published widely on Mexican visual history, and understands that the visual does not, by definition, lend itself to objective analysis. His ability to connect the production of visual artifacts to Mexico's social history is evident throughout this publication, *Looking for Mexico*. Mraz's analysis covers 1847 to 2007, a period in which visual media itself, in forms both still and moving, as well as Mexico's political history, were subjected to rapid change, stultifying sameness, and "revolution." At the heart of the author's analysis is how modes of mass production, dissemination, and the wide circulation of visual images enabled Mexican mass culture to arise. The process of teasing apart these images is a fun, if sometimes messy, process and the reader will be delighted with Mraz's flair for connecting the political, eco-

conomic, and social to the volume's images.

The first chapter's title, "War, Portraits, and Porfirian Progress (1847-1910)," invokes the author's ambitious task. Mraz begins with an intriguing exploration of the scant archival record that documents the introduction of photographic technology to Mexico during the U.S. invasion, in what he describes as the "world's first photographed war" (p. 7). The Mexican subjects of North American photographers are caught not only in the camera eye, but also in an existential struggle with the conventions of the photographic medium, as their identities were captured with what the author describes as a possible sense of resistance to both the invaders and the medium. The reader may, however, selfishly wish for the inclusion of more photographic evidence in the book, as some of the photographs that Mraz describes are, for whatever reason, not included. For example, one wishes to see the photograph of a Mexican surgeon in mid-amputation being overrun by North American troops.

The first chapter also includes analyses of the *tarjeta de visita* (visiting card) as a visual record and marker of rising bourgeois class-consciousness, the *costumbrista* (pictorial depiction of everyday customs) images that held both political and anthropological implications, and the visual construction during the Porfiriato of the "new Mexicanidad."^[2] The concurrent advancement of photography provides an effective scheme for tracking Mexico's development in the late nineteenth century, as the advances in the medium itself followed Porfirian development in the Mexican capital. Mraz's interesting analysis of Guillermo Kahlo's state-sponsored project to catalog the Mexican government's real estate holdings and its modernizing project is supported by rich historical documentation and wonderful reproductions. Kahlo's catalog becomes a meta-narrative for Porfirian positivism, where "austere, informative, and apparently objective, almost scientific" photographic representations of buildings and building projects stand two-dimensionally for the regime's own superficial and cosmetic works (p. 42). The author also explores the idea that Kahlo's subjects belie the foreign influence that the photographer found in his own country and with which Kahlo himself was in accord.

The second chapter, "Revolution and Culture (1910-1940)," also treats a broad period of vast social and political change. Revolutionary leaders like Emiliano Zapata and Francisco "Pancho" Villa are examined, but lesser-known participants in Mexico's revolutionary era, such as the North American photojournalists who flooded the

nation to document the civil war, are examined only briefly. The chapter's most interesting protagonist is Hugo Brehme, whose static and stylized photographs are, according to the author, a continuation of the costumbrism that froze Mexican identity in a nostalgic, archaic economic mode where the nation's overwhelming geographic and climatic forces dominate the photograph's stereotyped human subjects. Brehme's subjects, according to Mraz, politically transformed Mexico into an aesthetic cliché (p. 80). Here Mraz raises the "social question" that has plagued Mexico throughout its history, and with which the government still grapples today: what to do with the poor, antiquated, and insignificant masses? Their activity seems irrelevant to modernity and unable to contribute to the process of modern state formation.^[3]

Nationalist visual representations differ from those produced by foreigners, such as the "racist" North American representations of Mexico disguised as "anthropological" studies. Mexican modernists would rebel against not only foreign composition but also purveyors of the quaint like their fellow countryman Brehme. The chapter's images hold profound political implications, from a developing nationalist imaginary to the rupture (and eruption?) of the Revolution and the consolidation of the ruling political monolith, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party), or PRI. Brehme's signifiers of poverty, tradition, and Mexican identity became trite and meaningless, and in the gaze of post-Revolutionary modernists, like Manuel Álvarez Bravo, *petates* (woven bedrolls), *serapes* (shawls), *jícaras* (drinking vessels), and agave plants are infused with lives and meanings outside of their own utility. Álvarez Bravo, as Mraz keenly observes, enriched his own work with, among other international influences, the austerity and elegance of Japanese plastic arts.

But Álvarez Bravo's work contrasted greatly with the photographs that today are associated with the twentieth century's "biographies of power." Agustín Víctor's project of "pictorial history" enshrined Constitutionalists and other Revolutionary generals, and the ruling party recognized within the images the power to institutionalize and construct a new national history. Mraz's beautiful analysis of Álvarez Bravo's photograph, "Sr. Presidente Municipal," evokes the ironic insignificance of a peasant "politician" dwarfed under the weight of the images that comprised the "official history" tacked to the wall behind him.

The student of Mexican film history, when reading

chapter 3, might ask if another treatment of the golden age of Mexican cinema is really necessary. Included in the chapter are obligatory reviews of the comedies and lachrymose melodramas starring the usual suspects: Cantinflas, Pedro Infante, and Dolores Del Rio. Persistence, however, pays off with the author's masterful analysis of the recently completed restoration of Fernando de Fuentes's *Revolution Trilogy* (2007). Mraz provides insight into the historical context of the trilogy's production, its financing and official support, presidential interference, and de Fuentes's own desire to create cultural history, all of which are wonderfully analyzed and located within the consolidating and ossifying post-Revolution.

Strangely, no examination of Mexican film production from the last two decades is included. The final chapter, "New Ocular Cultures and the Old Battle to Visualize the Past and Present (1968-2007)," is most memorable for its omissions. The reader is left to wonder what might have been if Mraz had attempted to study the works of more recent Mexican filmmakers. An analysis, for example, of Alejandro Jodorowsky and his transgressive, revolutionary *El topo* (*The Mole* [1970]) might have opened a space for the discussion of Mexican cinema's attainment of an international audience, as well as the possible nascence of our current age of endless irony. A discussion of Alejandro González Iñárritu's more commercial ventures and his co-optation of Quentin Tarantino's style and disjointed narrative chronology is also absent, where a space for discussion of Hollywood's globalizing influence might have been indicated. Most conspicuously absent, a counter to those homogenizing influences from abroad, and crying for attention, is the small but growing body of work of Carlos Reygadas, whose film *Japón* (*Japan* [2002]) is a concentration of surreal images, full of modern Mexico's rituals and existential questions. Filmed with neither a screenplay nor professional actors, a certain static authenticity (historicity?) emerges in *Japón*. Reygadas's camera work recalls Álvarez Bravo's photographs, while the titular locale invokes each artists' "orientalism," if you will. An analysis of Reygadas's provocative and graphic *Batalla en el cielo* (*Battle in heaven* [2005]), a film that seemingly avoids narrative coherence, would have afforded Mraz an opportunity to comment on, to name but a few topics, contemporary Mexico's ruling economic class, its anachronistic military traditions, the interstices between visual violence and eroticism, and Mexico's sheer sensuality, all of which are graphically brought to the screen in Warholian fashion. The title of the book's last chapter itself

strangely recalls the name of Reygadas's film.

Criticism of this ambitious work seems trivial given Mraz's ambitious undertaking and deft analysis, and may reflect this critic's own personal biases more than any inherent flaw with the text at hand. However, jarring visual studies and sociological jargon (ocular, synecdoche, massification) disrupts the prose's flow. The "appearances" of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag seem forced and compulsory. As stated above, the book shares the same problem with others of the genre. For example, lacking the primary film texts to watch while reading results in long lists of films dissolving into one another and forming a largely forgettable totality, reminding the reader that constructing a golden age periodization is possible, if not entirely helpful.

Considering these minor bones of contention, the book is as striking as the author is capable. Staunch aficionados of visual culture should find something to like, and steadfast Mexicanists will enjoy the book's breadth. The book is imbued with critical dexterity and, when combined with the historical analysis, with impressively coherent ideas. Mraz provides the academic with a tool suitable for use in upper-level classes in Latin American or Mexican history. The ample photographs, illustrations, film analyses, and comprehensive bibliography provide opportunities for discussion, review, and further reading. The inclusion, for example, of Kahlo and Fuentes provided this reviewer with information previously unknown that had an immediate impact in both research and classroom planning.

Photography and filmmaking are markers of modernity. The two media are useful for reconstructing both the historical trajectories of the technologies, as well as a nation's shared common history, culture, and ethnicity as represented in the documents. Visual constructions of Mexican identity may contain, as the author demonstrates, strikingly different cultures and geography, all of which become natural subjects for visual representation. Mraz successfully draws from Mexican images the sense of reality that words often fail to produce: in fact, the sense of reality from images that often seem to have replaced words. The work's breadth both fortifies (and only occasionally hampers) the intellectual endeavor, but Mraz's historical analysis effectively places Mexican visual culture within a concise context that is enjoyable to read. To paraphrase Octavio Paz, Mexican identity is constructed of distinct races and languages, as well as of various levels of history. Mraz's thoughtful treatment of this profound idea benefits scholars, students, and other

interested readers with its near comprehensive, but necessarily abbreviated, coverage of a rich and colorful topic.

Notes

[1]. Jorge Ricardo, "Documenta fotógrafo la evolución de una nueva cultura urbana mestiza," *La Jornada: Sección Cultura*, December 21, 2006, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/12/21/?~section=>

[cultura&article=a05n1cul&partner=rss](http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2006/12/21/?~section=cultura&article=a05n1cul&partner=rss).

[2]. Porfiriato is the name given to era of the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910).

[3]. The "social question" is an analytical construction found in Mark Wasserman and Cheryl E. Martin, *Latin America and Its People*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008).

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