



Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 2008, 283-287
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Erica Segre. *Intersected Identities. Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

Mexican Visual Culture looking beyond ‘the Big Three’

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Erica Segre’s *Intersected Identities. Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture* is a valuable contribution to the study of visual culture in Mexico, not least because the book succeeds in its stated aim “to explore areas of visual culture that have tended to be seen as subordinate or mere adjuncts to the triumphalist pictorial canon founded on the modern Mexican Mural movement (usually represented by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros)” (1). It is by no means the first to do so but it is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of works which look beyond the mural movement. The book’s ambitious scope covering two

centuries enables Segre to show the developments and discontinuities in visual culture over time and the cross-fertilization that took place between different media. The extensive use of primary sources and illustrations is also to be commended.

The Introduction to *Intersected Identities* establishes the theme of “visual identities in reproductive media” as the book’s main concern and sets out its rationale, methodology and structure suggesting, albeit briefly, the connections between the chapters. Each chapter then focuses on a different aspect of visual culture in a given period and the book is arranged chronologically. In Chapter One, Segre provides a very interesting account of the development of *costumbrista* iconography in literary periodicals in the mid nineteenth-century. At this time, the *cuadro de costumbres* was the dominant literary and pictorial genre that typically portrayed common social types (such as the pulque vendor or china poblana) and national landscapes and landmarks. *Costumbrista* articles and images, Segre convincingly argues, fostered patriotism and established shared cultural values and identity during a period of transition. Segre identifies five influences on the *costumbrista* genre: the physiology genre and social observation, the panorama installation, the figurative tradition of Mexican folk art, the camera obscura and the daguerreotype, and travel literature. Thus, the author demonstrates that foreign and Mexican traditions and high and popular culture shaped Mexican *costumbrismo*, which is shown to have successfully combined breadth and detail, education and entertainment to fulfil its nation-building purpose. In spite of its nationalist purpose, Segre cautions the reader against assumptions that *costumbrismo* was simply propaganda; rather, she suggests, the genre left scope for a self-aware, critical assessment of contemporary society.

Chapter Two begins to address one of the key threads running through the book; the theme of how ethnicity has been represented in Mexican visual arts. The chapter focuses on Ignacio Manuel Altamirano who, as a result of his Indian heritage, rejected the homogenising tendencies of Porfirian nation-building and the attempted acculturation of the Indian population. Instead, Segre argues, Altamirano endorsed a

valorisation of Mexico's Indian heritage and of a living Indian culture in the present. In his descriptive, nation-conscious writing, Altamirano continued the *costumbrista* tradition to which he added new ethnic subjects. Consequently, he was recognised as an important predecessor by *indigenistas* (*Indianists*) of the 1930s. As well as considering the representation of ethnicity Altamirano's own work, Segre analyses how the satirical press of the late nineteenth-century used racial stereotyping to discredit and ridicule Altamirano and other powerful Indian men, notably Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz.

Chapter Three examines the representation of Mexico's indigenous population in film in the post-revolutionary period. The chapter focuses on the films of Emilio ('El Indio') Fernández and his collaborations with the cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa. Having worked for a time in Hollywood, Fernández returned to Mexico to produce films that would counter the dominant Hollywood stereotypes of the Mexican lower classes, which had been adopted by Mexican films in the form of *cine mexicano pintoresco*. Segre uses a helpful case study of the Fernández-Figueroa film *María Candelaria* (1943) to show how the pair borrowed from representations of indigenous peoples and their pre-Columbian heritage in photography, engravings and murals to produce alternative images of the indigenous population in film. In so doing, however, Segre rightly points out that they merely created new iconic filmic archetypes that, in turn, influenced later artists of the *neomexicanismo* movement of the 1980s.

Whereas the films of Fernández-Figueroa can be classified as rural tragedies, later films of the 1940s and 50s were interested in the new, rapidly developing and changing urban environment. The representation of this new space in film and photography as well as film's relationship to modernity is the focus of Chapter Four. In this chapter Segre begins to reflect on the important relationship between medium and content, which is developed in Chapters Six and Seven and again highlights the connections between the different visual media. This cross-fertilizations between media is well illustrated by her analysis of the representation of the new Nonoalco bridge in photography,

engraving and film. Overall, Segre argues, representations of modernity and progress in visual culture were not unquestioning, often juxtaposed the ideal and reality and were frequently ironic.

Chapter Five returns to the question posed in Chapter Three of how to represent Mexico's indigenous population, this time with reference to photography. The chapter compares the different ways photographers Mariana Yampolsky, Graciela Iturbide and Flor Garduño responded to the new self-awareness of the problematic relationship between photographer and subject. Yampolsky tries to remove the role of the photographer. Iturbide is a 'method photograpaher' who immerses herself in the subject, yet sometimes makes the photographer's role visible. Garduño is the least self-conscious in arranging all her images and allowing the role of the photographer to remain visible. Segre suggests that Yampolsky and Iturbide followed their predecessors, Nacho López and Lola Álvarez Bravo, in trying to move away from documentary, ethnographic photography, which reinforced racial hierarchies and difference in order to acknowledge the problematic relationship between photographer and ethnic subject. The discussion of the work of Yampolsky and Iturbide, whose photographs are analysed further in Chapters Six and Seven, is interesting, but the connections posited between them and their predecessors are not entirely convincing.

The issue of the relationship between photography and identity in Mexico is pursued in Chapter Six with a discussion of several Mexican photographers working in the 1990s including Maruch Sántiz Gómez, Jorge Camarillo, and Tatiana Parcero. The photography of this period is characterised by ambiguity, distortion and manipulation, which aims to problematise fixed identities. As in other chapters, Segre combines breadth with detailed analysis of selected images.

Chapter Seven takes as its subject photographic representations of objects which form part of everyday life in Mexico; the veil and similar items such as the *lienzo*, *rebozo*, *huipil*, and *sábana* (sheet). The observations in this and the previous chapter about the relationship between medium and content are particularly insightful as Segre shows

how the aforementioned cloths have become a motif in Mexican photography which also refers and relates to the medium of photography.

Chapter Eight returns somewhat to the approach adopted in the first four chapters by locating the representation of archaeological artefacts in Mexican photography and mixed-media installations in the context of cultural nationalism and discussions about (post-)national identity, origins and, in the case of contemporary artists, official memory. The reader of the first four and last chapters is thus rewarded with an account of the trajectory of Mexican nationalism as expressed over two centuries of visual culture. Having touched on the implications of new digital technology in Chapter Six, in the final chapter Segre analyses the multimedia and mixed-media work of Silvia Gruner and Gerardo Suter and contextualises it in relation to their predecessors and particularly with reference to the modernist photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo (whose work is also discussed in Chapter Seven).

In the introduction Segre suggests that “each chapter can be read as a discrete essay” (2). It is certainly true that the chapters can stand alone, but reading the whole book allows the reader to appreciate the complex relationships and influences between different media and over time. One of the monograph’s greatest contributions is to highlight these relationships. For this reason, it is disappointing that the book does not have a conclusion to bring together for the reader the many “cumulative interconnections and contrasts” touched on in the introduction and which are evident on reading the whole book (2). The book’s only other shortcoming is the effort required to negotiate its self-described “heteroclitic” style (2). The effort is rewarded, but the style may present an obstacle for some readers. These points aside, Segre’s book covers an impressive range of material and is a very welcome addition to the study of nineteenth and twentieth-century Mexican cultural history, cultural nationalism and visual culture.