



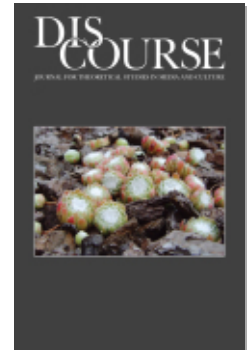
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Seeing Women Photographed in Revolutionary Mexico

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Seeing Women Photographed in Revolutionary Mexico

Horacio Legrás

Pure beholding, even if it were to penetrate to the innermost core of the Being of something present-at-hand, could never discover anything that is threatening.

—Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

In the matter of the visible, everything is a trap.

—Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*

The Mexican Revolution is associated with the names of Francisco “Pancho” Villa and Emiliano Zapata, Álvaro Obregón and Francisco Madero, and Diego Rivera and to a lesser extent Frida Kahlo. This overt domination of male figures is perhaps predictable given the historical context of the revolt and the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of Mexican society at the time. And yet, some of the most recognizable and reprinted photos of the Mexican Revolution are photos of women. The image of two apprehensive waitresses serving breakfast to Zapatista revolutionary troops at Sanborns in 1914 (Figure 1) is as emblematic of the occupation of the capital by the peasant armies as the iconic photograph *Villa and Zapata*

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at the Presidential Chair. Hugo Brehme's *Soldaderas on Top of a Train* (Figure 2; Brehme's original German title reads simply *Zapatista Camp on Top of a Train*) and the candid figure of an Adelita hanging from a train-coach rival the iconic value of Villa's gallop in front of the camera or Zapata's grave gesture while posing with a presidential band crossing his chest, a rifle on his right arm and his left hand resting on the saber's guard. In *Photography and Memory in Mexico*, Andrea Noble rejects the vindication of women suggested by the popularity of these images. Visual proof that women were *also* engaged in the revolution and they *too* were historical participants is instead evidence of a subtle subalternizing logic made manifest in the words "also" and "too." Besides, Noble argues, even when women are visible, visibility is often constructed in terms of invisibility.¹ Confronted with this disagreement—to use Jacques Rancière's apposite word—Noble urges being on guard against the temptation of a merely indexical reading that would preempt and disavow the whole problem of conceiving of women as historical actors in their own right.

Perhaps the lack of representation of women as historical actors is due to women (and of course there are already too many inside this signifier) having been kept in a subaltern, silenced position in an affair that was, after all, marked by the macho bravado of the refrain "If they are going to kill me tomorrow, better that they kill me right away." Such an assumption cannot withstand even the most modest historical scrutiny. The mobilization of women is perhaps the most salient trait of the transformations brought about by the Mexican Revolution in the sphere of the social.² The array of revolutionary destruction that took place primarily in the countryside uprooted provincial life, sending hundreds of thousands of women from their homes into different urban centers. In these centers they encountered a modernization that was changing the landscape of the feminine in its own way, populating the city with the unheard of figures of the *chica moderna*, the flapper, and the *griseta*.³ The photographic record testifies to this movement, and yet the force of the testimony remains suspect.

Against John Mraz, for whom photographs need to be contextualized but not interpreted, Noble calls attention to the fact that the indexical evidence already poses unique "interpretive challenges."⁴ How far should we go in our vigilant approach to the phenomenality of the image? For Noble, the criticism of evidence and indexicality remains to a large extent inside the sphere of validity of these notions. In this essay, I argue that no criticism of evidence (or derivatively truth) can be obtained without tackling in a radical



Figure 1. Zapatistas at Sanborns restaurant, December 1914. Photo by Agustín Casasola. Casasola Archive, Mexico.



Figure 2. *Soldaderas* on top of a train. Photo by Hugo Brehme.

way and in the same movement the spheres of history, subjectivity, and representation.

I am not proposing to abandon the realm of perception or supplant the actual reading of photos with theoretical speculations. Photographs are certainly documents. The problem is *documents of what?* At this point a concise and elemental phenomenology of the photographic act is perhaps in order.⁵ In this phenomenology I discern three differentiated moments: a showing, a taking, and a seeing. Each moment corresponds to a subject position (sitter, photographer, viewer), and while the same physical subject may occupy all the positions, they are not interchangeable. For the sake of expediency, I will call the first position o, the second o', and the third o". The subject is in o, the photographer in o'. At this point, photography is the overlapping of two intentions: the photographer's and the subject's (even if that subject is merely natural and not human). The subject of the photo shows itself under certain forms or conditions. The givenness of an image preexists any selection by the photographer or any intention of a sitter. I am not talking about poses: every pose is an act of overcoding of figures already coded by their mere belongingness to the world.⁶ The photographer takes the shot, accommodating what is offered by the world into the parameters of his or her own perspective, dexterity, desires, technical limitations, and so on. The photographer has another chance of intervening in the image during the act of printing, an instance that should be rightly considered integral to the overall photographic process. Once printed, the photograph is the occasion of another seeing (o") that is structurally different from the intentionality that inhabited either the showing or the taking. It is at the level of seeing as the condensation of this process that our questions arise: What is the relationship of these images of women with the totality of the historical process? How can the reading of these photos challenge our assumptions about society, women, and revolution? How are we going to conclude or refute the idea that the women in these photos are historical subjects in their own right?

No sooner do we start considering these questions than we stumble into another problem. What is meant by "a rightful subject of history"? What notion of subjectivity and history is mobilized when we say that the women who populate the photographic archive of the revolution may not be presented as historical subjects "in their own right"? For our context—and perhaps for every context—a subject of history is a political subject of history. This is so because history is a priori and by definition the history of politically valid subjects and the history of nonpolitical subjectivities

becoming valid. It is necessary, however, to be on guard against historicist temptations. A figure who becomes a valid subject of history soon sees his or her claim naturalized. This naturalization erodes and devalues the specific political drive that prompted these identities into the light of historical existence. In Rancière's terms, recognized subjectivities become subjects of police rather than of politics, although the frontier between both realms is far more unstable than what Rancière leads his readers to believe.⁷ More on target here is Rancière's analytic of reality as split into its aesthesis, its politics (or police), and its logic. The question of how women appear on the historical stage is inextricable from the question of how the space of its unfolding represents a change in the conceptual economy that distributes bodies, tasks, and expectations. When Brehme photographs a group of *soldaderas* who have turned the top of a train carriage into an open-air "home," the aesthesis remains by and large the same (these are recognizably *soldaderas*), and its politics remain equally predictable. However, something happens at the level of its logic, where the figure of women is constituted as such in its utmost generality. The *soldaderas* are in place, but the woman in them is not. This is why although there are several men in the photos, we do not see them. As a matter of fact, all commentaries on the photo I was able to consult discuss only the female figures. Certainly a change in one order of the triad affects the other two. The indeterminacy of the figure woman destabilizes the orders of praxis and logic, but it does so under modalities that require a patient elaboration.

We are still working on the assumption that a politically valid subjectivity is one that seeks or obtains its inscription inside a historical process. What makes history different from reality is that this inscription needs to be simultaneously recorded and regulated. The exceptional position of photography in this arrangement lies in its presumed immediacy to reality. On the other hand, we do not pretend even for a second that photography is alien to the disciplinary effects intrinsic to any act of representation.⁸ The proposition I want to advance here is that the figure of woman by itself politicizes the photographic register. But what does it mean to speak about a politics of photography? It means above all that photography ceases to be a simple confirmation of how things stand in the world. It means that photography begins to crisscross the registers of the political and the police. As for the style of the questioning, we take our cue, once again, from Rancière—this time from his discussion of the politics of literature.⁹ In Rancière, such a politics is inextricably linked to the dynamic of hegemonic stabilization and destabilization of the political sensorium. Cultural forms are

not only reflections of social practices but are also definitive ways in which the world is ordered and sense is made. In other words, a politics of photography as a politics of literature does not accept the world as a stage or a background. At least in the case of Mexico, this is not how things were at the beginning.

Porfirism and Photography

The establishment of commercial photography in Mexico coincides with the long reign of Porfirio Díaz. Unlike the proverbial twentieth-century dictator, Díaz was not afraid of technologies of reproduction, and his government made few attempts at censorship. The regime perceived all technical innovation as being in line with the progressive goals of the administration. What could a stable order fear from an objective form of rendering social reality? Photography could neither add to nor subtract from the stability of this world. In Rancière's parlance, the politics of photography was actually a form of police.¹⁰ The practical uses of photography confirmed this distribution of tasks. Photographers and cameramen accompanied official delegations to remote corners of the country, attended and minutely registered the glittering jubilation of high-society banquets, and even took pains to acknowledge that the all-too-visible poor of Mexico City represented a standing debt in the positive transformation of society.

However, when in 1906 a strike among mine workers broke out in the northern city of Cananea, reporters and photojournalists were reticent to travel to the north to cover the story. Although we do have some images of the strike, most of them were taken by American photographers either working for the company or accompanying the some 260 military men who were dispatched into Mexico's territory to restore order at the American-owned mine. Leaving aside technical difficulties that would have barred a testimonial style of photography (cameras were heavy and difficult to transport, and exposition time was still long), one wonders what language the hypothetical Mexican photographers could have drawn upon in order to testify to the event. How does one photograph a strike in such a way that the meaning of "strike" is an integral part of the meaning of the image itself? In a regime of visibility that was so rooted in its certainties, how could the insinuation of the new be shown? I am less interested in an answer to this question than in underlining the simple fact that it was Porfirism's ideological grip on Mexico that convinced so many people of the inability of photography to imply any challenge to the dominant order.¹¹

Photography's Ontological Function

Four years after the Cananea strike the Mexican Revolution broke out, and the same art of mechanical reproduction that ignored the strike became enamored of the revolt. But at this point, the demand on photography was no longer merely testimonial. It became poetic and even ontological. By this I mean simply that photography was charged with the task of capturing an element that was not given in the simple phenomenality of the visible. All photography of the revolution shares the pretension of having the revolution as its overarching subject. But this subject is manifestly different from what is photographed, since a revolution cannot be shown. It is simply too large an event, as Leon Trotsky once noted. As a result, the great dramas of humanity are diminished rather than served by aesthetic representation.¹² In Trotsky's view, what art cannot capture is the intrinsic overdetermination of history that makes revolutions both possible and inconceivable. We are not facing a technical problem that can be solved with better or more advanced means of representation. The fact that the revolution is an object too large and too complex to be subjected to an adequate rendering—an object without objective status—occupies all thinking of the revolution. Historians frustrated with the ungraspable nature of the event often prefer to favor the study of local practices and microhistories. The procedure seems faultless, since the Mexican Revolution was preeminently a local affair that coalesced into a national campaign late in its development. On the other hand, it is obvious that the historical significance of these local episodes can never be justified on the basis of local reconstructions alone. For the revolution to appear in its own right, we have to keep adding the individual instances or examples of revolutionary fervor together until something like a Borgesian aleph of sorts appears before our eyes: that is, until we are almost unable to recall the individual elements whose addition enabled a glimpse at the revolutionary totality. The revolution becomes visible one degree short of the sublime.

An optical paradox ensues: political relations acquire a sort of transparency as the totality of existence begins to be illuminated by a light other than that of inherited norms. And yet this universe that becomes more pristine also becomes—in terms of its mechanical reproduction—more elusive. However, we will rarely mistake a photo of revolutionary Mexico for a photo taken before the revolution—especially if those portrayed in the photo are women.

Let us consider for a moment how things stand in *o*. At that level, where a pose is already constituted although not for the

benefit of any lenses, the task of signifying the revolution falls upon the common men and women in their average everydayness. In part, this is so because everydayness itself, especially of the popular type, has been proscribed and dissimulated in the previous Porfirian distribution of the sensible. The photography of the revolution abounds in compositions that show a carnival of classes and professions, social types and characters, all in the limits of a single frame. The type of photo that interests me in this essay also presents a carnival of sorts. In them, women—most of the time middle-class women, often daughters of wealthy ranchers—pose in *soldadera* attire, with rifles in one hand and cartridge belts crossing the bosom of their immaculate dresses. (In other photos, they appear drawing swords and looking at the camera as if facing a spiteful enemy.) These images appeared very early in the history of the revolution, and historian Graciela Cano has identified them as a specific Maderista trope.¹³

The great adventure of the photography of the revolution takes place between *o* and *o'*. In contrast, what became the dominant modality in the constitution of the archive, fixed in *o*", is virtually absent during the first twenty years of the revolt.¹⁴ The dialectic between the photographic subject and the photographic act dominates this moment, but it is the world in its showing (in *o*) that imposes its conditions. It is perhaps out of this respect for *o* that the poetic unveiling of reality is undertaken without straying outside an informative and realist style. Carlos Monsiváis is surprised by this trait of the photographic archive, and he charges Agustín Casasola, the father of Mexican photojournalism, with imposing this stylistic trend on Mexican photography. Casasola's meticulous ordering of his own archive—one that we know now is more than "his own" archive—produced an indelible mark in the memory of revolutionary Mexico.¹⁵ For Monsiváis, Casasola is responsible for the fact that the archive has been combed through and explored only in certain ways. The form of exploration of the archive has created a discourse. In this discourse, Monsiváis notices the conspicuous absence of "fotos de denuncia," and he ventures, as an explanation, the hypothesis that the historicist style of Casasola himself molded the way photographers related to reality.¹⁶ Simply put, the photographers of the revolution thought that they were witnessing history in the making, and they recorded the present as if it were history. While in normal times this may mean just photographing the representatives of the state, eminent scientists, or successful social figures, the photographers of the revolution had to calculate the historical relevance of their photos against the backdrop of a highly mobile political process.¹⁷ Still,

according to Monsiváis—and I see no reason to doubt him on this score—photographers were looking at the present with the eyes of the future, as if it were already past. The formula is certainly surprising, because if something distinguishes photography from all other forms of art, it is that the present is its only and exclusive subject. This is not the only oddity characteristic of this archive. A second one pertains to the fact that many of these historical photos were actually staged, without this fact tainting their testimonial credentials. We know that those soldiers fighting an imaginary battle or those leaders—such as Villa and Zapata—mockingly seated on a presidential chair are posing. But nevertheless we conceive of these images as the pinnacle of historical documentation. This is so because something inside our interpretive paradigms fights and rejects the tautological simplicity of a positivistic style of questioning. Our concern is with truth, not with appearances, and undoubtedly something of the order of truth shines forward in these staged photos, as it does also, and perhaps even more forcefully, in these photos of white upper-class women photographed in the imaginary register of a revolutionary war.

Danger and Representation

Something slightly disturbing appears in o. They are women, but women not presented as subjects of history in their own right. These señoritas posing as revolutionary fighters: what do we do about these images? These are the same women who had been populating the studios of the first entrepreneurial photographers for decades. But the studio had disappeared from the background. We recognize in this disappearance a demand of the revolution upon the register of representation: the world became the only legitimate stage. This worldliness is obviously also in o, and less obviously, it is also a pose. This doesn't mean that we are confronted with snapshots. Technical limitations only allow representation to happen in certain ways. If neither the artificiality of the studio nor the reality of history, then what serves as a backdrop for this photography? I will call it, evoking some words from Martin Heidegger, the worldhood of a (revolutionary) world. Such a revolutionary world is almost the opposite of what Heidegger understood for a world: a set of intelligible references whose mutual interconnection unveils a fundamental design. In a revolutionary world every attempt at representation backfires, since reality itself is shown in all its inconsistency. In a truly revolutionary picture, the system of assignments is broken and inoperative. It is a pity that we don't

have a photograph of these wonderful descriptions that have come down to us via written testimonies, descriptions such as the one portraying revolutionary times as those in which “the dispute for a stolen piano was equitably solved by dividing it in half with an ax.”¹⁸

If we don't have most of these images, it is not so much because the opportunity did not arise but rather because one of the fundamental functions of the photography of the revolution was to appease a wild reality. Olivier Debrouse has remarked that unlike the two other big major wars of the time—World War I and the Russian Revolution—the unpredictability and dynamism that characterized Mexican photography made it the point of origin of a lasting mythology.¹⁹ However, there is also a way in which the unscripted nature of the revolt conditioned the Mexican photographers to take a step in the direction of the idealization (and disavowal) of revolutionary chaos. Think, for instance, of those photos showing revolutionary groups more or less neatly formed, their rifles cocked and pointing toward an imaginary enemy. These traditional photographs, which I call the war postcards, seem to strive to reassure the viewer that the horrific stories told about the revolution cannot be all true, that the force that irrupted all over Mexico, shaking centuries of traditional allegiances and well-respected and instituted forms of domination, can be mastered after all. The photos seem to say “see, here, this unruly people can be gathered, formed, made to stand still and finally captured in the grip of a reassuring representation.”

But what happens when the same type of war postcard photography shows women and not men? What happens when these women are not revolutionary soldiers or *soldaderas* marching along with their men but instead are middle-class women who under no circumstance would leave their home, take up a weapon, or charge into battle? What exactly is appeased here? For a while, I was happy with simply dismissing these photos as just an irresponsible play of people standing too far from the actual dangers of a revolution. A timely question at a public presentation forced me to reconsider the issue. In the end, I joined the common sense that has always said that photos do not lie. For my particular context, this means basically that these photos belong to the revolution, that something in them was invited to consistency, but also that something slightly frightening at their origin demanded to be appeased. What needs to be appeased are women. Women—and this remains true of all representations of women in the revolutionary archive—bring to this photography a sense not of urgency but rather of insurgency, and insurgency is the undisputed meaning of all photography of the revolution. It is because insurgency is the meaning of this

photography that appeasing is one of its functions.²⁰ Appeasing is by definition an ambivalent trope. It cannot itself appear without conjuring the object that it abhors. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida conceives of this conjuring by which a peasant is a peasant, a general is a general, and a woman is a woman as an ontologizing gesture whose function is to ward off the anxieties that always arise when the consistency of reality wobbles. Yet, the work of ontologization always fails. An ontology that equates being with presence soon finds out that the distinctive traits of the real are not given in the perceived reality itself. Every appeasing implies a conjuring—a conjuring destined to undermine the appeasing that it seeks to serve. Sensing this predicament, the photography of the revolution resolves itself in a conjuring act by which reality is simultaneously invoked and forestalled.²¹

The question of a subject of history in its own right acquires a new significance in light of our previous discussion. The subject can only appear in the folds of a dialectic between conjuring and appeasing. Undoubtedly, we should be able to deconstruct the fictions of historicism without any recourse to photography. If photography is nonetheless a privileged site for such deconstruction, it is on account of the role that evidence—and derivatively positivism, certainty, and so on—plays in the history of the photographic art. Historicism introduces all kinds of disturbances and blockades into the interpretive discourse about images. In this function, historicism relies heavily on its identification and interpenetration with the discourse of liberalism. The indexical trap has always been a bourgeois trap. Its inconsistencies are the inconsistencies of liberalism at large. At this point, the problem of avoiding a merely indexical reading of images overlaps with the question of a subjectivity able to ground itself beyond the liberal *récit*. In a revolution, more than in other instances, the categorical apparatus of liberalism can no longer sustain the system of fictions that had the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the subject as both its goal and its presupposition. In this context, the old rhetoric of individualism, of the subject as owner of his or her fate, comes increasingly under fire to the point that even sociologists find it fashionable today to call for a nonintentional analysis of revolutions.²² To go back to Rancière, in whose terms I initially posed the problem: how can the subject of politics remain a subject in the state of police? To be a historical subject means to belong to the moment in which one lives. It is a form of actuality, in the sense of both living in the present and being present. What can be simpler than that, especially for photography? What can be simpler than just taking the shot of the subject that is present in my presence? If the solution is not that simple, it is

because we cannot blindly equate the present with the actual.²³ It is positivism and derivatively liberalism that lie in the abhorrence of the actual. The problem is that so many of our aesthetic and “critical” discourses remain unwitting heirs of the late nineteenth century’s reshaping of social ontology. In one of his earliest essays, Alan Sekula noted that “photographic realism emerges historically as both product and handmaiden of positivism.”²⁴ The immobility of the present—even its objective existence—is a peculiar positivist credo. In reality (although perhaps, as the Ireneo Funes of Jorge Luis Borges’s story, we do not have the right to proffer that word), things do not stay put. In film, a trick is played on the brain by a rapid succession of images that simulates movement. What is the equivalent but inversed illusion implied in the stillness of a 1/60 shot? The assumed objectivity of all photography, which is at the center of every realist aesthetic of the photographic act, needs to be relaunched on bases that are no longer positivist, that are no longer liberal.

The photos portraying women in the revolution do not do them justice. They do not do them injustice either—that will come later. The women of the photos that concern me here—the Maderista trope of the daughter of the rancher dressed in full war attire—use their poses and their dresses to signal the belonging of their figures to the meaning of the times, as Villa seated in the presidential chair signaled the belonging of his actions to the realm of the political. In doing this, these sitters showed outstanding historical prescience.

There is a photo housed in the archive of the Fototeca Nacional at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia that shows General Ramón Iturbe posing with four heavily armed women who were referred to as Iturbe’s “Feminine General Staff” at the time (Figure 3). As Iturbe explained, there was no such thing as a feminine staff in his army—the ladies in question had been introduced to the general by the American consul in Durango. These daughters of Durango society had heard of the revolutionary army approaching the city and thought that their honor was best safeguarded at the home of the American consul. Once Iturbe’s army occupied the city, the women grew intrigued by what everybody described as the courteous manners of the general. They asked the consul to invite Iturbe for dinner and then asked him to pose with them for a photo. So, everything starts with four women imagining or fantasizing a male desire and then going to some lengths to incite and domesticate it. To judge by the photo, they even “(cross-)dressed” General Iturbe in an exacerbated display of revolutionary masculinity. The fact that Iturbe is invited to perform his masculinity in



Figure 3. General Ramón F. Iturbe posing with four women dressed as soldiers, March 1911. Photo by Mauricio Yáñez. Fototeca Nacional at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

the photo is for me a clear indication that what is at stake in this image is gender itself.²⁵

When Judith Butler says that gender is performed, she is saying also that gender belongs to the sphere of projection—in the sense that it is a project rather than a given.²⁶ Any representation of gender is provisional, because in the end gender remains beyond representation. Or better yet, it is a representation that appears in lieu of another representation that fails to consist—not a thing but a sign. As a projection of the subject, gender is tied up with questions of desire. To say that this desire belongs to the subject does not settle the dispute about its meaning. Some of the impossibilities shown in the photo of General Iturbe and his “feminine staff” have to do precisely with the projections of desire. Everything we know about this photo confirms that women’s desire is what is at stake in the photo, even more than the dreaded desire of the revolutionary troops. The desire expressed in the photo does not easily fit into the picture envisioned by Monsiváis of the revolution as preeminently erotic in nature, as an unveiling of a long-repressed sensuousness.²⁷ Instead, in this photo female desire is stated at a level of absolute generality. What this desire was for is something that the photo cannot tell. There was no concept in the world that could accommodate the desirability expressed here. Unless there

is in the world something that is not of this world, and what is not of this world is without object, in the sense of an object-less desire. This photo bears witness to this desire without object. Since that desire is not of this world, it belongs to the sitters only partially. They are—or consist—under its shadow. Or to say the same thing historically, when the photo was taken, the concept “woman” had already been overrun by its reality. This overrunning of the concept by its incarnation constitutes—as Rancière, among others, has said—the distinctive feature of a true political subjectivization. What is appeased in this photo? Not the general who is supposed to look threatening. I would say that it is the meaning of women once this signifier is intersected by the signifier revolution. Is not the urgency to attribute a role to these women a form of appeasing? The image seems not to be enough—a leftover still needed to be conjured or exorcised—and it is to this leftover that the fable of the feminine staff is directed. Against any style of positivism—even the phenomenological one—a subject acquires the dignity of the historical by no longer being equal to its concept. Where have we learned the strongest and most enduring lessons on this point if not in revolutionary Mexico?

What defines a subject is not what he or she is but rather what he or she lacks. Although images are said to be worthier than a thousand words, they are—like subjects—always lacking. Indexical readings are so popular precisely because they are the appeasing of this lack. The history of photography has been marked by an anxiety peculiar to the unanchored nature of the image. It is only apposite that this anxiety should be redoubled in the case of photographs of women. “Anxiety” is a peculiar word. Sigmund Freud, who tarried with the notion for decades, in the end reduced anxiety to a signal of an unfathomable danger to come. In the wake of Freud, Jacques Lacan locates this anxiety beyond language in the terrain of the real itself. Why should the subject feel anxiety before the real? Precisely because this real is the subject’s counterpart. It was born from the same operation that begot the subject itself: a partition in the fabric of the indifferent performed by the force of the symbolic. The operation produces a leftover (the famous object “a” of the Lacanian algebra), and it is this object “a”—the sheer materiality of what is in total indifference—that is related to anxiety. It is the whole that reminds us that we are not one with the world, because we have been separated from it by language. Human beings only relate to this partition through myth, above all through the myth of Oedipus in which the original partition is repeated on a more human scale. In his discussion of the castration complex, Freud recalls the myth of original hermaphroditism in

Plato's *Symposium*. Aristophanes explains Eros as the search for the lost unity of a humanity that once sufficed to itself—at least insofar as erotic longing was concerned. Aristophanes's ontology of the human views each person as a *symbolon* (token or part) looking for its supplement and its recognition in the larger fabric of the world. Myth (or symbolic integration) works full speed in this photo: How do the different parts of the photo hang together? What are these señoritas doing side by side with a revolutionary general? Why this carnivalesque overlapping of appetites and virtues? Somebody came up with a story. Ah, yes: these women are Iturbe's feminine staff! Everything is solved through an indexical trick. But look at the photo again, and you will see—between o and o'—that something does not add up, that the historicist interpretation bypasses the real problem. In the end, there is something deeply apotropaic in this image: a masquerade of women is mounted in order to show women. This apotropaic nature of the image is an index of its deep historicity. In the case of Mexico, it is connected with a whole complex of patriarchal injunctions that Octavio Paz ciphers in the problem of “no rajarse” and “rajadura” in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.²⁸

In the photo, women are shown but also conjure. All conjuring is always the conjuring of the inapparent: of what does not appear, even in a photograph. In stressing the debt of the real to the unreal for its realization, we are not inviting a retreat from an interpretation of the visible. The question of representation cannot be completely circumvented (what else is there to talk about?). But if indexicality is a trap, it is so because reality is always structured. Photography, painting, and even looking-at are ways in which we work our way through the debris of the visible. That a woman is a woman and a rifle a rifle is the predictable statement of liberalism's entrenched belief in the autonomy and self-presence of every subject and of positivism's credo on the objective nature of the world we inhabit. However, as Bolívar Echeverría writes in an adventurous moment of his essay on and translation of Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, there is no true objectivity inside the capitalist determination. Having in mind a process that cannot be any other than the process of the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican philosopher continues: “to think a revolutionary process means to revolutionize thinking.”²⁹ This statement seems to suggest that a revolutionary photography can only be seen with revolutionized eyes. Are periods of ideological conformism then condemned to a sort of analytical blindness? We know from experience that this is not the case. Actually, since the reality of domination is a constant of capitalism, the movement of its resistance fatally emerges everywhere as a counterbalance from which we can glimpse a view of another

world, as the desire of the four señoritas surrounding Iturbe invites us to glimpse another possible structuration of gender relations in Mexico. In Echeverría's bold argument, what Marx meant by objectivity in the theses is a full immersion in the materiality of perception. This materiality is fully overdetermined in the style of our *o*, *o'*, *o''*. This means that the act of interpretation itself—of which any true perception partakes—is a form of praxis. We interpret, Echeverría writes, either in domination (inside an interiorized regime of police) or in rebellion: that is, we make of interpretation a transformative practice.³⁰

In the end we discover that like all phenomenology, my coarse phenomenology of the photographic act has a blind spot at its center. Not everything in a photo is structured by *o*, *o'*, and *o''*. Anxiety relates to something that is outside the picture, although simultaneously it is without doubt inside the text. This is the reason why indexicality, and for that matter a minimum of ideological liberalism, can never be completely wiped out from our interpretive horizon. Very likely all the subjects involved in the photo that occupy us—General Iturbe, the four ladies, and the photographer—were ethically (if not politically) liberal subjects, and their whereabouts in the world were guided by a positivism of sorts. But the combination of these two ideas, the autonomy of the subject to determine its context and the tautological redundancy of the existent to what is actually there, before our eyes, can never produce the image that we have before us. The meaning of this photo cannot be obtained by adding a revolutionary general to four upper-class señoritas and adorning them with the predicates of the revolutionary. Something else is needed. This something else does not pertain to the photo itself, and it is only in terms of what is not given in the photo that the photo makes sense at all.

From these observations some general conclusions become possible. The world and objectivity (although they are clearly not the same) are never a given. A battle for the constitution of reality—or for the meaning of that reality—is always the fundamental political battle of a given time. The consequences of this axiomatic decision are always exasperated in Latin America, since historically its reality can never be said to be a reality out there, to be simply grasped or even interpreted. Our praises and our objections are never directed to representations—to entities merely at hand, naturalized in the very act of our contemplation. As Echeverría notices, for a true objectivity, that is, for a form of apprehension that interprets in rebellion rather than in submission, there is no true opposition between looking at the world and transforming the world. Interpretation as a form of praxis (rather than a reading of

a master code) seems to require out of necessity an always renewed criticism of the imaginary structuration of the world. This renewal of the critical question inaugurates a movement that is circular only in appearance.

At some point in history, women emerged in Mexico as if in a new light, so to speak, and we wonder if photography could or could not be a faithful register of that irruption.

Notes

1. Andrea Noble, *Photography and Memory in Mexico* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 101. On the visualization and yet invisibilization of women, see Noble's "Zapatistas en Sanborns (1914): Women at the Bar," *History of Photography* 22, no. 4 (1998): 366–70.

2. The abundance of photos of women in the revolutionary period has an economic relationship to a notorious decrease in the centrality of the patriarchal pose. Thus, the figuration of masculinity also changes in the revolution. Carlos Monsiváis sees that change embodied in Madero's figure. See Carlos Monsiváis, "La continuidad de las imágenes: Notas a partir del archivo Casasola," *Artes Visuales* 12 (1997): 13–15.

3. The meeting between rural uprooting and an urban revolution that takes gender as its index gave way to novel articulations of subjectivity such as the one incarnated by Benita Galeana, the communist leader of peasant origin whose life Monsiváis uses as evidence for the claim that the Mexican Revolution was also and perhaps fundamentally an erotic revolution. See Carlos Monsiváis, "La aparición del subsuelo: Sobre la cultura de la Revolución Mexicana," *Siempre* 1122 (December 14, 1983): 36–42. The *griseta* is already a prominent figure in the prerevolutionary period.

4. John Mraz criticizes what he considers the psychological reading of photographs in several of his books and essays. See, for instance, his discussion of Leonard Folgarait's *Seeing the Mexican Revolution Photographed* in John Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 23; Noble, *Photography and Memory in Mexico*, 111.

5. This phenomenology can be read as a highly simplified version of what Philippe Dubois himself considers the essential components of the photographic act in his book *L'acte photographique* (Paris: Nathan, 1990).

6. This level at which images exists for an Other is what Jacques Lacan has in mind when he affirms that the gaze preexists the subject. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1999).

7. Rancière develops his analytic of police and politics in chapter 2 of *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

8. Photography's immediacy to the real is far more pronounced than that of history, and this is why photos can be documents for historical analysis. The fact that few "documents" are so unreliable should already alert us that in the field of the visible, things are far from straightforward.

9. See especially Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011).

10. Rancière, *Disagreement*, chap. 1.

11. We have photos of working men and women during Porfirism, but these images bespeak constant dignity and content. See John Mraz, “Mexican History in Photographs,” in *The Mexico Reader*, edited by Gilber M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, 297–330 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 297–330.

12. For a discussion of Trotsky’s position on revolution, see Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution: 1789–1820* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

13. Gabriela Cano, *Se llamaba Elena Arizmendi* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 2010).

14. Carlos Monsiváis (“La continuidad de las imágenes”) calls the photography of the revolution the DNA of the nation, but it is quite clear that this was not the meaning these photos held at the moment of their initial circulation. This fact partially explains the commercial failure that was Agustín Casasola’s “Historia gráfica de la Revolución Mexicana.” It is likely that the value, import, and meaning of the photography of the revolution would be quite different today if its form of preservation and reproduction were held privately rather than publicly through the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and the Fototeca Nacional.

15. We know now that many of the photos attributed to Casasola were taken by other photographers and hence are wrongly credited to him.

16. Monsiváis, “La continuidad de las imágenes.”

17. Illustrative here is the work of Sabino Osuna, a photographer who specialized in portraits and architectural studies but whose work shifted to a careful record of the impact of the revolution on official Mexico in the period 1910–14. An important collection of these photos is held in the University of California–Riverside’s Special Collections section.

18. Manuel Gómez Morín, *1915* (Mexico City: Cultura, 1923), 23.

19. The absence of state censorship—when not of the state itself—greatly facilitated the task of photographers. As John Mraz comments, unlike in World War I when European commanders restricted the access of photographers to the front, in the Mexican case “all the caudillos understood the importance of projecting themselves and their movements visually.” Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution*, 13.

20. This does not mean that women can appear in all possible subject positions (nobody can). For instance, we don’t have photos of women being shot: the privilege of appearing before the absolute master is strictly reserved for men. One can read the whole episode of “Nacha Cenicerros” in Campobello’s novel *Cartucho* as revolutionary death as privilege. See Nellie Campobello, *Cartucho*, translated by Doris Meyer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

21. As in the case of ontologization, the obligatory reference here is, of course, the use of conjuring to signal both refusal of and desire for in Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1999).

22. See Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

23. The distinction between the present and the actual is the kernel of Derrida’s claim that deconstruction may indeed be seen as a form of radical empiricism.

24. Alan Sekula, *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1982* (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia, 1984), 56.

25. The poster of this wonderful meditation on the revolutionary image that is Paul Leduc's film *John Reed Insurgent Mexico* presents us with a patriarchal order that struggles to reassert itself in the medium of the revolutionary turmoil. The fact that maleness needs also to be performed tells us up to what point this attribute has lost its "naturalness."

26. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2006).

27. Carlos Monsiváis, "Introducción," in Salvador Novo, *La estatua de sal* (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2002), 16.

28. Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1992).

29. Bolívar Echevarría, *El materialismo de Marx* (Mexico City: Editorial Itaca, 2010), 20.

30. *Ibid.*, 18.