

Cultura visual en América Latina

Edición a cargo de **John Mraz** — Universidad Autónoma de Puebla

Visual Culture in Latin America

Guest Editor: **John Mraz** — Universidad Autónoma de Puebla

Introduction

A few years ago, using the concept "visual culture" would probably have resulted in confusion (and consternation) rather than communication. That has changed. As Susan Buck-Morss remarked, "Visual culture, once a foreigner to the academy, has gotten its green card and is here to stay."¹ Today, the study of modes and techniques of visual address is fundamental to thinking critically about the times in which we find ourselves, and crucial for an education relevant to a world undergoing an "image revolution" on a scale so unprecedented that we are warned about the dangers of "hypervisuality". Indeed, the incipient development of visual studies programs has been a direct — if tardy — reaction to the hegemony of images in contemporary society. The power exercised by the myriad pictures which inundate our daily lives has generally received little attention in academia because they are produced by new and/or "unrespectable" media: photography, film, video, cartoons, advertising, computers, etc.

An offspring of cultural studies and art history, visual studies analyzes a wide variety of imagery within their historical contexts. In focusing on the ways in which the cultural importance of images derives from their concrete and local meanings, it avoids traditional art history's fossilized reverence for abstract, ineffable, and "universal" values. At the same time, it is differentiated from the sociological excesses of cultural studies by its concern with aesthetic expressivity; this is a vital consideration, for the source of images' appeal is their artfulness. The apparently objective representation of reality by modern technical images (photos, film and

video) veils the fact that they are actually highly constructed artifacts. However, their intentionality is neither immediately nor easily perceived; thus, the urgent need for a "visual literacy" capable of "reading" the images which surround us.

The study of visual culture has a particular relevance for Latin America, where high levels of illiteracy make pictures the primordial form of representation. The articles in this issue of *E.I.A.L.* examine how Latin Americans portray and are portrayed in a variety of media, both technical and traditional.

The New Latin American Cinema redefined film in this area of the world; here, four essays offer a survey of some representational strategies which have developed within that movement. Robert Stam proposes that hybridity, chronotopic multiplicity, and the redemption of detritus have been the common denominators of neologistic aesthetics in Latin America and the Caribbean; garbage is one point at which these themes converge, and Stam reflects upon its incorporation in Brazilian films. Tzvi Tal examines the development of Latin Americanism in Fernando Solanas's works, by charting it from his first and still influential film, *La hora de los hornos*, to his latest, *El viaje*. Michael Chanan considers the ways in which the social production of space is constructed in movies from the 1990s. Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón reviews the important Mexican film, *Rojo amanecer*.

Though we are aswim in photographs during our wakeful hours, the study of these omnipresent picturizations is quite underdeveloped compared to the attention which cinema has received. Here, several articles redress that hiatus by analyzing documentary photography from various countries in Latin America. John Mraz contrasts the different ways in which Sebastião Salgado, a current superstar of photojournalism, has portrayed his *patria*, Brazil. The representation of political power in Mexican photography during the early years of the 20th century is the focus of Ariel Arnal and Andrea Noble. Arnal considers how Zapatismo was incorporated — and how Emiliano Zapata chose to pose himself — in photographs, while Noble focuses on one Porfirian image as a metonym for the dictator's authority and his delimited vision. Leigh Binford compares the images of the Central American wars made by Susan Meiselas and Adam Kufeld. Juan Antonio Molina offers an interpretative periodization of the ways in which blacks have been depicted in Cuban photography.

More traditional forms of visual culture are dealt with by Eli Bartra. She analyzes the complex syncretism of elite and popular art in the figure of Frida Kahlo, a painter who has assumed mythic proportions in contemporary culture. As one instance of this, Bartra examines the multi-faceted

hybridization of the "*Friditas*," clay reproductions of Kahlo's paintings fashioned by Josefina Aguilar Alcántara, an artisan in a Oaxacan village.

It is hoped that these articles will contribute to opening new windows onto novel ways of thinking about Latin America.

JOHN MRAZ

NOTES

1. See the "Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October*, 77 (Summer, 1996), pp. 25-70. The questionnaire was sent to "a range of art and architecture historians, film theorists, literary critics, and artists," of which 19 replied; their written responses are an interesting introduction to this concept in the US today.