

Photography and Vision in Porfirian Mexico

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The privileged position of the visual within the formation of Mexican cultural identity cannot be overrated. As the historian Serge Gruzinski states in the introduction to his book, significantly entitled *La guerra de las imágenes*:

[L]a imagen ejerció, en el siglo XVI, un papel notable en el descubrimiento, la conquista y la colonización del Nuevo Mundo. Como la imagen constituye [...] uno de los principales instrumentos de la cultura europea, la gigantesca empresa de occidentalización que se abatió sobre el continente americano adoptó —al menos en parte— la forma de una guerra de imágenes que se perpetuó durante siglos y que hoy no parece de ninguna manera haber concluido.¹

As a productive point of departure, there are three issues in Gruzinski's analysis that interest me here. Firstly, Gruzinski establishes the visual image as a site of struggle which occupies a key position at the heart of what was to become the Mexican nation. Secondly, the visual is consequently bound up with questions of power. And thirdly —and this point is not as explicitly articulated in the quotation—, the visual realm as site of struggle is predicated on the presence of the gaze. Now, Gruzinski's study of the 'war of images' focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on colonial Mexico; but his subtitle, "De Cristóbal Colón a 'Blade Runner'," and the dates that his book encapsulates, 1492-2019, *do* leave the questions tantalisingly open.

This text represents an intervention into debates around the visual realm in Mexico at a specific point in the early twentieth century. It aims to explore a series of issues pertaining to power, vision and the gaze, and how they are played out in what I tentatively, and with some trepidation, want to call one

of the most visual forms of visual representation: namely, photography. Although I hesitate to make this claim, I will do so nonetheless because I want to place an emphasis on the indexicality of photographic representation and the way in which there is a marked tendency, when looking at photographic images, to conflate photographic vision with a notion of 'natural' vision. More specifically then, I propose to focus on one particular photograph from the Casasola Archive (about which I will add more below) which was made in July, 1910, and is called *Porfirio Díaz at a Ceremony Commemorating the Death of Benito Juárez*. My aim here is to offer a number of interrelated readings of this one image. I am particularly interested in this notion of 'reading' because in historical studies there is a tendency, precisely because of the indexicality of photographic representation, either to reduce the photograph to its role as objective witness, or else to ignore it altogether.² In the former role, the photograph illustrates or provides evidence of historical events, events that are located somewhere beyond the photographic frame. In this way, the possible dynamic relationship between that which exists within the photographic frame and that which exists beyond it tends to get overlooked. Photographic reading in this study, therefore, involves reinstating the visual as central to photographic images by attending to the complex set of codes by which photographs articulate meaning. However, it is important to stress, at this point, that my aim is not to reduce the photograph to an aesthetic object *tout court*. Instead, I aim to try to tease out the complex relationship between the photograph as both a visual and historical product, a relationship, I want to suggest, that crystallises in (i) the gaze of the spectator and (ii) the way in which photographic meaning hinges on an understanding of metonymy.

Having stated that, to some extent, I propose to privilege the visual, I want to contradict myself and start by locating the photograph within both its historical and archival contexts, for without these contexts, what I want to say about vision in this photograph will lack meaning and will precisely render the photograph into mere aesthetic spectacle, something that I am keen to avoid. When looking for photographic context, there is no better place to turn than to the caption. As photography critic Victor Burgin argues:

We rarely see a photograph *in use* which is not accompanied by writing: in newspapers the image is in most cases subordinate to the text; in advertising and illustrated magazines there tends to be a more or less equal distribution of text and images; in art and amateur photography the image predominates, though a caption or title is generally added.³



Porfirio Díaz at a Ceremony Commemorating the Death of Benito Juárez. Fototeca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Fondo Casasola

The photograph that is the subject of this study is no exception. The caption with which it appeared in the 1985 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, in Oxford: *Tierra y Libertad: Photographs of Mexico 1900-1935 from the Casasola Archive*, is, to repeat, *Porfirio Díaz at a Ceremony Commemorating the Death of Benito Juárez*, and it is dated July, 1910. The caption anchors the photograph and its meaning at a specific historical moment, July 1910, and provides us with information that allows us both to identify its central figure, the dictator Porfirio Díaz, and the ceremony in question. With this minimum of information and a smattering of background knowledge, we can locate its making to one month after the June 21 presidential election. That is, the election that Díaz had won and yet also the one for which, in 1908, Díaz had assured the North-American journalist James Creelman that he would not stand. The photograph also predates the 'official' outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, November 20, by some four months. We can determine, therefore, that this photograph was made towards the very end of the period of Mexican history known, after the dictator, as the *Porfiriato*.

During the *Porfiriato*, Mexico experienced unprecedented peace and order after the turmoil of the post-independence years, when Conservatives and Liberals (with the controversial figure, Benito Juárez at their head) had vied to define the future direction of the nation. Ultimately, the Liberals won the struggle, and through the Laws of the Reform, a strong, secular state was established, one which Díaz, also a Liberal, was to inherit. The *Porfiriato* represented a period in which the country underwent a process of rapid and dramatic modernization and urbanization, which in turn brought about economic and material progress. Despite the economic progress—or maybe because of it—the territory demarcated by the national boundaries still lacked a coherent identity. According to Alan Knight, Mexico at this time "was less a nation than a geographical expression, a mosaic of regions and communities, introverted and jealous, ethnically and physically fragmented, and lacking common national sentiments."⁴ Largely unconcerned with the means by which these fragments were to cohere, Díaz nevertheless cared that they should adhere to the centre. Ensnared in Mexico City, he allowed political abuse and endemic corruption to go unchecked (or even encouraged it) in the provinces, in the name of tightening central control. Wealth in the form of land remained in the hands of a privileged few families, whilst great pockets of the population subsisted in abject poverty. While French culture was *à la mode* amongst the Mexican aristocracy (the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City was redecorated to look like the Champs Elysées and French cuisine was *de rigueur* in the capital), sanitation and diet amongst the masses was so poor that average life expectancy was estimated at around thirty years.

It was against the backdrop of Porfirian Mexico that Agustín Victor

Casasola—the photographer to whom this photograph may be attributable—initiated his career. In a recent article, Ignacio Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba traces Agustín Casasola's earliest photographs to the 1902 tour that Díaz made of Veracruz.⁵ By 1905 Agustín Víctor and his brother, Miguel Casasola, had started work as photojournalists for the government-sponsored newspaper *El Imparcial*, and then, in 1912, Agustín Víctor Casasola founded the Agencia de Información Gráfica. The Agencia de Información Gráfica collected photographs made by a range of photographers⁶ in order to sell images of the Revolution to the foreign and national press, and thereby compete with the foreign photojournalists who were arriving in Mexico at this time to cover the historical events that were taking place.⁷ In time, once the violent phase of the civil war was over and the events photographed became less instantly newsworthy, images from the Archive were used to form the basis of a visual history of the Revolution. The *Historia gráfica de la Revolución Mexicana* (1960) charts the Revolution from its inception during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, through the armed struggle and the ongoing period of institutionalisation, to the first years of the presidency of Luis Echeverría.⁸ Negatives in the Casasola Archive, amounting to some 600,000, these days are administered by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and are located in Pachuca, Hidalgo, having been purchased by the national government in 1976.

Images from the Archive are firmly located within a tradition of reportage.⁹ Reportage is founded on a belief in photography's power of objective transcription, something that has become the subject of intense debate in recent years. In her introduction to a selection of images from the Archivo Casasola, *Jefes, héroes y caudillos*, Flora Lara Klahr argues that despite the fact that the Casasolas were convinced of photography's role as a neutral tool that bore faithful witness to the events that it recorded, nevertheless, "por más que se declararan 'ajenos a todo partidatismo' su trabajo editorial tuvo, desde las primeras publicaciones, el propósito de orientar políticamente las convicciones de los lectores."¹⁰ Another commentator, Cristina Cuevas-Wolf, takes up Flora Lara Klahr's point about the bias of the Casasolas, but shifts the emphasis away from the biographical towards an examination of the relationship between the state and the institution of photojournalism:

Print capitalism assisted in informing and connecting the bourgeoisie through a common, 'official' language (Spanish) that was accessible to the educated elite. Compound this print language with a repertory of images that included public events, celebrations of industrial growth, chronicles of the social life of the elite, Mexican customs (social misery replaced by folklore),

cultural and entertainment events (mediums for social cohesion and ideological justification), and a newspaper was able to extend its readership to the limits of the educated Porfirian society, while effectively convincing it of the nation's and its own prosperity on the basis of 'objective' visual testimony.¹¹

Whilst it is not possible to prove that this particular image was reproduced within a specific newspaper,¹² we can nevertheless be confident enough to assert that it is representative of precisely the kind of images that would have appeared in print culture of the time, and is also emblematic of the kinds of photographs that, following Cuevas-Wolf, would have been instrumental in maintaining class hierarchies during the *Porfiriato*. Having established the historical and archival contexts to which the photograph belongs, it is now time to turn to the photograph itself, in order to determine how it might have been instrumental in maintaining class hierarchies and inscribing a sense of Díaz's power. This reading will form the basis of the first phase of my analysis and the focus will be primarily on symbolic elements within the image. After setting up a relationship between what I will term the three 'P's' — Porfirio, power and photography—, I then want to go on to the second phase, which is based upon an exploration of how this line of argument converges in questions of the spectacle and spectatorship.

It has become a commonplace of scholarship of Porfirian photography to note that images dating from this period are governed by a reduced and, in turn, reductive set of rules concerning pose and posture; what could be represented and how it could be represented. Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis, in his essay "Notas sobre la historia de la fotografía en México," has commented that:

a los fotógrafos del porfiriato les importaba registrar el paisaje (físico, humano) y asumir como naturaleza domeñada a multitudes o montañas, a indígenas o atardeceres. La sociedad era, únicamente, la Buena Sociedad, aquella que se desprendía del rostro esculpido y las infinitas medallas de Porfirio Díaz.¹³

It is fairly obvious to point out that this photograph of Porfirio Díaz is wholly conventional in its representation of the dictator and serves both to confirm and to construct Díaz's power. In it, we see Díaz presiding at an official ceremony. He is seated at a table which is covered by an ornate, decorative cloth. The chair on which he is seated is elaborate, possibly gold-encrusted, and bears a certain resemblance to a throne. The air of regality within the photograph is further reinforced by the sceptre-like stick in the

dictator's hand and the 'throne-room' drapes that fall behind him. These more tangible, physical objects which connote power are further echoed in the formal organization of space within the photograph. It is important to underscore the fact that Díaz is visually the central and therefore most important figure in the image, for the camera angle makes him proportionately the largest figure within the photographic frame. Díaz is at once part of the general audience and at the same time separate from it, insofar as the drapes and the carpet on which the table and 'throne' are positioned create a space for him that is quite discrete from that occupied by the rest of the audience. Finally, as the photograph's caption informs us, our gaze is drawn to the spectacle that exists off-frame (and I'll come back to this point): namely, a ceremony to commemorate the death of Benito Juárez, interchangeably known as the Liberal hero of the Mexican *Reforma* and "Benemérito de las Américas." The mere presence of Díaz at this ceremony confers on him the powerful status of centre of the nation. If power is nothing but its representation, then what better medium of representation to inscribe one's power than photography? As Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*: "In stamping photography with the patent of realism, society does nothing but confirm itself in the tautological certainty that an image of reality that conforms to its own representation of objectivity is truly objective."¹⁴ In other words, the three 'P's —Porfirio, photography and power— converge in this photographic image, since it does nothing but confirm that Porfirio is powerful: therefore, he is powerful. What is more, this power, because it is photographically represented, is beyond question.

Now, you do not need a degree in art history to perform this kind of reading. It is pretty straightforward. Although I would point out that when dealing with photographic images, there is a marked tendency not to articulate how the image signifies, and I would suggest that this is precisely because of our propensity, almost despite ourselves, to see photographs, as Roland Barthes suggests, as messages without codes.¹⁵ Once we accept that photographs are messages *with* codes, then any notion of their objectivity or their transparency becomes untenable. Instead, what comes into focus is the photograph's status as a highly-mediated cultural product, caught up in a Foucaultian 'regime of truth.'

Having established how this photograph signifies on a fairly simple level, I now want to pursue my analysis by bringing to the foreground a discussion of issues of the spectacle and spectatorship as they are played out both within and beyond the photographic frame. What is particularly striking about this photograph is the way in which it stages a struggle at the level of the gaze. As our study progresses, the struggle to see will come into sharper focus. I have already mentioned briefly the question of the spectacle that exists off-frame:

the ceremony to commemorate the death of Juárez. I want to suggest that in this photograph, the emphasis is not so much on the spectacle itself (for the very obvious reason that we cannot see it...) than on the act of spectating. As spectators of this photographic image, we spectate a group of spectators who are viewing a spectacle that is denied to us as spectators of this image. On one level, then, the spectators' look beyond the limits of the frame is mirrored in the spectators' gaze within the frame itself, and in this sense the photograph could be considered self-referential. In fact, an awareness of our position as spectators is reinforced, in the image, by the way in which we are at once positioned beyond the frame (as 'straight-forward' spectators) and also within it, insofar as the camera angle and camera position locate us amongst the members of the audience who sit to Díaz's left-hand side in the auditorium (note the heads at the bottom left and right-hand corners of the photograph).

In her seminal essay on the documentary photograph, "Who is Speaking Thus?," Abigail Solomon-Godeau articulates the following relationship between the spectator and the photograph:

Like the Renaissance painting [the camera image] offers a static field in which orthogonals converge at the single vanishing point. [...] Such a system of pictorial organization [has] certain ramifications. Chief among these is the position of visual mastery conferred on the spectator whose ideal, all-seeing eye becomes the commanding locus of the pictorial field. (Solomon-Godeau, p. 181)

Solomon-Godeau is clearly concerned to expose the essential connection between power and vision, and more specifically the power that is invested in the spectator of the photographic image as master of the gaze. Now, what is interesting about this particular photograph is that our visual mastery of the image is ultimately undermined: all the gazes within the photographic frame, and most especially that of Díaz as the central figure who occupies most space within the image, are directed towards a spectacle that exists off-frame, and that we consequently cannot see. In other words, in this image the question of power relations (or the three 'P's) is not only played out at the level of symbolic elements within the photograph and the organization of space. As a site of struggle to see between the subject of the photograph (Porfirio Díaz) and the spectator, the spectator's visual mastery is snatched away: she cannot see, cannot master a spectacle that ultimately confers power on the central figure who views it: the all-seeing, all-knowing dictator.

However, how are we to square this reading of the omniscient Díaz with two fundamental points: (i) as suggested at the outset, this photograph was

made a mere four months prior to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution that was to overthrow Díaz and send him into exile; (ii) historical evidence suggests that Díaz, far from being all-seeing and all-knowing at this stage, was curiously blind to the events that were waiting to happen.¹⁶ To bring this study to a close, I now want to go on to suggest a final reading of this image, one which focuses on the way in which it inscribes not only a notion of Porfirio Díaz's power through the metaphor of the gaze, but the way in which the image also figures the photographic limits of that gaze. The key to this reading lies in the spectacle that exists in the space off-frame.

The spectacle, it will be recalled, is a ceremony to commemorate the death of Benito Juárez, which occurred on July 19, 1872. During his lifetime, Juárez had become a controversial figure insofar as he had tampered with the Constitution in order to gain reelection, supposedly in the interests of stability, or so he claimed. As Charles Weeks states in *The Juárez Myth in Mexico*, with the "specter of dictatorship, symbolized by Santa Anna" within living memory, certain people were inclined to take a dim view of such actions.¹⁷ Amongst those to oppose Juárez's reelection was Porfirio Díaz, who launched a failed revolution against him in 1871. Despite his open enmity to Juárez in his lifetime, at the latter's death, given the favourable re-evaluation that his presidency was to receive, it became politically expedient for Díaz to legitimate his own presidency through an invocation of the hero of the *Reforma*. To this end, Díaz was to initiate a series of national celebrations of his predecessor, starting with the centennial of his birth in 1906 and culminating with the inauguration, in September, 1910, of the *Hemiciclo* dedicated "Al Benemérito Benito Juárez. La Patria," in the Alameda in Mexico City.

If, thanks to Díaz's prodigious efforts, Juárez comes to represent the 'Patria' in the popular imagination, then the ceremony represented in the photograph also invokes the modern Mexican nation. By definition, nations can only be represented metonymically. The part, Juárez, stands in for the whole, the nation. In this photograph, the nation is, in turn, metonymically displaced from the ceremony to its embodiment in the gaze of Díaz. In other words, what we see Díaz seeing in this image is, in the final analysis, a vision of Díaz. What is more, if meaning within this photograph is predicated on an understanding of its relay of metonymical displacements, then these displacements, in turn, inhere in the very act of photographic representation. As Christian Metz argues in an essay on "Photography and Fetishism": "Photography is a cut inside the referent, it cuts off a piece of it, a fragment, a part object, for a long immobile travel of no return."¹⁸ In other words, a photograph, by definition, is a part object that stands in for a notional whole.

If in the context of my discussion of this photograph, what might this

notional whole be? If we discard any notion of photography's status as purveyor of Truth or objective reality, and come to view it instead (as is now common currency) as a highly mediated ideological product, then it becomes impossible to claim that this part object —*Díaz at a Ceremony Commemorating the Death of Benito Juárez*— could ever stand in for the whole of this fragmented entity that is Mexico in July 1910. In order to articulate what the 'whole' might be of which this photograph is a part, we must recall that it exists as one image within the limited repertoire of images that characterise Porfirian photography. In other words, this photograph, which represents Díaz's gaze and which, through the metonymical displacements outlined above, rebounds on itself, metonymically represents the whole of Porfirian photography. Porfirian photography, it will be recalled, was concerned only to document and thereby assert (to cite Bourdieu again), with "tautological certainty," the power and authority of the dictator. The *campesino* masses who existed beyond this official frame of vision, and who were shortly to rise up, were as good as invisible within such a limited repertoire. By pointing out the play on metonymy both within the frame and in the photographic gesture itself, we can read this photograph as one that inscribes the very limits of Porfirian vision: a field of vision that is so narrowly focused upon itself that its peripheral vision is very severely curtailed.

NOTES

1. Serge Gruzinski, *La guerra de las imágenes: De Cristóbal Colón a 'Blade Runner' (1492-2019)* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994), p. 14.
2. For a recent book that attempts to bring the photograph back into focus within historical debate, see Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 1997).
3. Victor Burgin (ed.), *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 192.
4. Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Latin American Studies, 1986), p. 2.
5. Ignacio Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba, "A Fresh look at the Casasola Archive," in *History of Photography*, 20: 3 (1996), 191-195 (p. 191).
6. Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba, p. 191.
7. I would like to thank John Mraz for bringing this information to my attention.
8. See Flora Lara Klahr's introductory essay to the collection in *Jefes, héroes y caudillos: Fondo Casasola* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986).
9. I hesitate to claim that they belong to a tradition of documentary here, for as Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out, 'documentary' is a word that became common currency only in the 1930s. See *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991), p. 169.
10. Flora Lara Klahr, p. 107.
11. Cristina Cuevas-Wolf, "Guillermo Kahlo and Casasola: Architectural Form and Urban Unrest," in *History of Photography*, 20: 3 (1996), 196-207 (p. 202).
12. As noted earlier, the source of this photograph was the 1985 exhibition "¡Tierra y Libertad!

Photographs of Mexico 1900-1935 from the Casasola Archive," Oxford: Museum of Modern Art. I have subsequently also found this photograph in Manuel Rodríguez Lapuente, *Breve historia gráfica de la Revolución mexicana* (Mexico: Gustavo Gil, 1987), which includes both a detail of Díaz alone and also the full photograph.

13. Carlos Monsiváis, "Notas sobre la historia de la fotografía en México," *Revista de la Universidad de México*, 35 (1980), unnumbered pages.
14. Quoted in Solomon-Godeau, p. 171.
15. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp.15-31 (p. 17).
16. As Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba points out, Díaz was not alone: "The extraordinary transformations that the Revolution would bring were only dimly understood in its initial phases by the Casasolas," p. 191.
17. Charles Weeks, *The Juárez Myth in Mexico* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1987), p. 17.
18. Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetishism," in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. by Carol Squiers (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 155-164 (p. 158).