

"Los chistes constituyen una venganza anónima que daña sin permitir el contraataque. Pueden ser considerados como una forma de resistencia que evita una confrontación abierta con las estructuras de autoridad contra las que se resiste".

El humor político es una forma de participación que, destruyendo la seriedad, solemnidad, pomposidad y ritualismo que envuelven a la política, resulta en pérdida de respeto o de miedo a la política. Sin embargo, también reduce la capacidad de la gente para oponerse al poder al promover la desmovilización.

El segundo capítulo se aboca al intento de una sucinta descripción de las características del mexicano, para entender en qué medida y por qué el mexicano prefiere reír a participar políticamente. Los tres capítulos restantes se centran en: el chiste político en México, los chistes políticos contra los presidentes mexicanos y los chistes actuales contra Zedillo.

En resumen, un libro interesante, bien escrito, con mucho humor... y serio.

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SUSAN KISMARIC: *Manuel Álvarez Bravo*. New York, Thames and Hudson, The Museum of Modern Art, 1997.

The most renowned Mexican photographer – and perhaps of all Latin America –, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, nonetheless followed a curiously irregular path to his consagración in the MOMA's exhibit and this sumptuous catalogue of his work. When he began photographing in the 1920s and 1930s, his innate capacity was recognized by artists who constitute a veritable "who's who" of the lens: Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Paul Strand, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. The respect which he engendered was encapsulated in Cartier-Bresson's remark when someone likened Álvarez Bravo's imagery to Weston's: "Don't compare them, Manuel is the real artist." Álvarez Bravo's importance was such that the founder of surrealism, André Breton, sought him out in 1938 to commission an image for the cover of a surrealist exhibition catalogue. However, despite his recognition by such luminaries, Álvarez Bravo had so little visibility within the US that in 1976 the critic A.D. Coleman ironized: "For an image maker whose work has been known to and admired by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Diego Rivera, and André Breton, remaining obscure after fifty years of work in his chosen medium is no mean feat."

The "rediscovery" of Álvarez Bravo by US curators probably began with

the modest 1971 exhibit at the Pasadena Art Museum in California. Subsequent exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (1978) and San Diego's Museum of Photographic Arts (1990) made Álvarez Bravo a much more familiar figure, and the catalogue essays by Jane Livingston, Alex Castro, Nissan Pérez and Ian Jeffrey facilitated his entrance into histories of world photography. Susan Kismaric dutifully cites these precedents and asserts that, "In spite of these fine studies, much remains to be explored in the field of Mexican photographic history."

I could not agree more with Kismaric: Mexican photography is virtually unknown outside its borders, although its power is consonant with the artistic precedents established by that country's famous muralists and lithographers. I am therefore baffled by Kismaric's decision to curate yet another exhibit on Álvarez Bravo, as well as write an essay which adds little to either Mexican photographic history or to understanding better this artist's work. I sense that her preference was related to the infamous and ubiquitous presence of the "market" in deciding who gets exhibited. The image selection appears to be designed to promote US owner's holdings of "vintage prints" in what might be described as a strategy of "ghoul marketing." Most of the photos reproduced in this book come from US collections, and the exhibit will no doubt increase their value manifold when Álvarez Bravo reaches the end of his long life.

It is unlikely that Kismaric's motive in curating this exhibit stemmed from any particular interest in Mexico, a country about which she demonstrates little knowledge. She was clearly dependent on the recollections of a man in his nineties who has become accustomed to creating his own history, and may be captive of his own myths. For example, she argues for the importance of the political in his imagery, citing his "idea of the artist as a representative of the people." It is a commonplace in the English-language literature on this photographer to identify him with popular art, and the daily life of common people has been a crucial element in his work. Nonetheless, to see his populist posturing in the 1966 essay, "Popular Art is the Art of the People," reproduced uncritically rubs a bit against the grain of those who live in Mexico and are aware of the intimate relation Álvarez Bravo has established with Televisa, the communications empire that dominates Mexican culture and whose tentacles extend throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

I find the political aspect of Álvarez Bravo's photography problematic. His only image of manifest social commitment, the "Striking Worker, Assassinated, Oaxaca, 1934," is rumored to be that of a bicycle delivery boy who had been run over by a truck in Mexico City. Kismaric attempts to assist Álvarez Bravo in claiming "social content" for the image "The Dreamer" by relating the "great compassion" the photographer felt for the *cargador* exhausted by his labors. Nonetheless, the image has no intrinsic political meaning without a

title explicitly describing its content. Given Álvarez Bravo's recognition of the importance titles have, the absence of a specific reference to these workers leads me to believe that its social context was created some sixty years after the fact. In another image, "Los agachados," Kismaric's lack of Spanish led her to miss the significance of the title, which she translated as "The Crouched Ones" instead of, for instance, "The Bent Ones." Álvarez Bravo clearly believes that this image and its title have a political connotation; when I once questioned him about the absence of social concern in his work, this was the image which he immediately offered as an example of his commitment.

There is, of course, no reason to search for direct political significance in the imagery of this extraordinary artist, whose creative powers are such that Peter Schjeldahl began his review of the exhibit by arguing that, "Manuel Álvarez Bravo is the greatest photographer." An essential focus of Álvarez Bravo has been the construction of a Mexican imagery, but one which rejects both picturesqueness and officialist nationalism. It is exciting to see him infuse international aesthetic forms with Mexican meaning. For example, the book's first plate, "Sand and Pines," is an early image from the 1920s which demonstrates that a young Álvarez Bravo was much influenced not only by pictorialism, but by the then pervasive interest in Japanese art. However, Álvarez Bravo's "bonsai" is a mini-Popocatepetl, one of the volcanoes which dominates the Valley of Mexico. Another example is the 1927 photo of a rolled-up mattress. Here, he chose not to use the beautifully textured, folkloric *petate* which provided depth to the still-lives created by Modotti and Weston. Instead, Álvarez Bravo photographed a Western-style mattress, but with the twist that its bands of shading make it look like the well-known Saltillo sarapes. In his imagery of the maguey cactus, we can see his interest in playing with this symbol of *mexicanidad*: in one photo it serves as a landmark, in another it has been "wounded," and in a third it has been so cut back as to appear castrated.

Álvarez Bravo's reworking of "Mexicanness" can be seen as well in his human subjects. The images of a boy drinking from the village fountain ("Public thirst") and a *campesino* standing against a wall ("Man from Papantla") contain all the elements to create the picturesque: white peasant clothing, bare feet, adobe walls. But, having awakened this expectation of the exotic, Álvarez Bravo cuts back against it with an artistry that refuses to reduce these people to symbols; they remain too particular, too individual to be able to "stand for" the Mexican peasantry. In his photo of "León from Angahua," Álvarez Bravo presents a boy dressed in rags standing next to a rock fence. No pity is elicited for this child, nor is he victimized by, for example, the expressionism which Sebastião Salgado uses to wrap Latin Americans in enigmatic and alienated misery. The imagery of Álvarez Bravo

is a modest portrayal of individuals who he seems to have "found" within their natural habitats rather than "created" through conspicuous visual rhetoric.

Manuel Álvarez Bravo has penetrated his culture to such a degree as to have distilled certain of its essences. It is unfortunate that Susan Kismaric demonstrates little capacity to understand either what Álvarez Bravo has accomplished or to be able to situate his work within the context that made it possible. At best, this exhibition and catalogue will introduce people in the US to the possibilities of Mexican photography; at worst, it will saturate rather than awaken their interest in the powerful imagery of their southern neighbors.

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SAMUEL BRUNK: *¡Emiliano Zapata!, Revolution and Betrayal in Mexico.* Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1995.

Zapata y el zapatismo, a más de 85 años del comienzo de la revolución, siguen siendo dos de los temas más prominentes en el México contemporáneo. Bajo la crisis actual del Estado, la imagen de este líder deja de ser un asunto puramente académico, para convertirse en uno relevante en la discusión pública mexicana. Sobre este trasfondo, la monografía de Samuel Brunk es de suma importancia, pues devuelve la imagen de Zapata de la esfera mitológica en la que se encuentra a su contexto histórico.

Basándose en abundantes fuentes primarias nuevas o que fueron poco exploradas hasta el momento, el autor nos presenta una nueva biografía política de Zapata. Según Brunk, todas las obras escritas hasta el día sobre el tema, tanto por protagonistas de la revolución como por investigadores, enfatizan más al movimiento que al líder mismo (p. xiii), explicando tal tendencia como parte de una inclinación más global de los investigadores a minimalizar la función de los individuos en la sociedad rural (p. xiv).

La investigación sobre Zapata, según el autor, se encuentra frente a obstáculos objetivos, que surgen de la falta de fuentes primarias de las cuales se pueda aprender distintos aspectos de la trayectoria de su protagonista. Tales aspectos son, por ejemplo, los movimientos diarios de Zapata, los factores de su niñez y su juventud que influyeron en la formación de su personalidad y, finalmente, la dificultad de evaluar hasta qué punto los distintos documentos que firmó son obra de su mano y no de las de los intelectuales del movimiento (pp. xv-xvi). Conviene señalar aquí que, a pesar de estas observaciones certeras, el autor no logra a lo largo de su obra