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Images of Zapata and the Construction of National Ideology

All Mexicans know Zapata. He is an integral part of their history. He has become the embodiment of *la Revolución*. What he symbolizes is taken for granted. It is as if Zapata, the name, the image, the living memory possesses revolutionary powers. He is the magic word and image that inspires, unites, guides, and strengthens.

Zapata's status as hero transforms him into a one-dimensional figure of history. His invocation is traditionally evocative and emotive rather than truly descriptive. In his life he was a man who fought for his personal beliefs. In death he became a vessel that has been filled over time by many.¹

Emiliano Zapata's involvement in the Mexican Revolution, which occurred between 1910-1920, began as a fight for the reclamation of land and resources on behalf of the disenfranchised villagers of his hometown, Anenecuilco, in the state of Morelos. Control of local government was also a concern, as it affected the agrarian issue. In September of 1909, Zapata was elected as the president of his village council, after which he fervently defended the villager's land and water rights. Zapata's efforts coincided with Francisco Madero's rebellion against Porfirio Díaz, as President of Mexico; This occurred in November of 1910 and has been designated as the official beginning of the Mexican Revolution. The strategic nature of Morelos highlighted the events in the state and attracted attention from the whole country. Zapata was elected "Supreme Chief of the Revolutionary Movement of the South," which further enhanced his identification as the leader of the state of Morelos. Agrarian reform was always the focus of

Zapata's agenda. As rebellion turned into revolution, Zapata continued his fight for land rights as leader of the people of Morelos, until his assassination in April of 1919. Zapata's death only served to propel him as part legendary and part mythic, who symbolized the people's struggle against oppression.

Zapata is a historical figure whose public memory has been constructed through oral narratives, text, and images. The history of Zapata has drawn many authors and artists whose depictions have immortalized him thus allowing for his continued development as an important figure in history. They keep his memory alive. Their compelling illustrations of Zapata make him seem present. So much so that it is as if those who speak, write, or create an image of him have lived and struggled all their lives with him at their side. I am no exception, since I have begun this project I feel as if Zapata is with me always.

Although known among the ruling class as a "criminal" during his lifetime, Zapata has subsequently come to signify ruling-class institutions, seamless ideologies, and a unified national heritage. Zapata has often signified competing values for varied constituencies locked in ideological conflict. The historical figure of Zapata is thus central to one of the key issues in current scholarship, namely, the divergent narratives of "La Revolución," that involve an ongoing struggle over which classes, ethnicities, and social movements Zapata most adequately represents. Each narrative seeks to claim Zapata's iconic status as a symbol for what they respectively represent nationally. Fundamental to constructing each of these competing national narratives of "La Revolución" have been hundreds of portraits of Zapata by major Mexican artists. In an attempt to induce and/or reassign ideological principles attributed to Zapata, these narratives continually invoke him visually, as well as through history, and fiction.

This paper is part of an extensive investigation for my Master's thesis. My thesis project

is an inquiry into the construction of Mexican identity and ideology through the development of images representing Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919), which focuses on images created by Mexican artists between 1910-1952. The thesis is the beginning of a much larger project that examines the development of meaning and significance of the image of Zapata, and its ongoing development as a symbol. Within this paper and due to time limitations, I have limited myself to a few examples of images that have contributed to the meaning and symbol of the image of Zapata.

The reason for the selection of Zapata over other revolutionary figures, as “the” symbol of *Mexicanidad* and Mexican ideology is a complex one. Zapata’s personal story and struggle is intertwined with agrarian reform and popular revolution. The image and ideology of Zapata make him an ideal symbol for official politicians who recognize the popularity of Zapata’s platform. These political figures desire to represent themselves as sympathetic to Zapata’s ideology—even when they are not—in order to garner support for themselves politically and in an attempt to validate their distinctive agendas. Through an association with Zapata, these politicians attempt also to maintain a connection with the *la Revolución*, which has often come to represent, “democracy and agrarian reform.” Zapata has been built up as a symbol of government, and within this context is portrayed as a National Hero across class lines.

On the part of Mexican artists, Zapata embodies that which is identified as a signifier of the active struggle for the civil rights of working class Mexican people, especially those of indigenous ancestry. Thus his image is the personification of the dissident ideals held by many Mexican artists, which explains why Zapata’s portrait would be incorporated within their artwork and elevated to a symbol of their “non-official” values.²

The image of Zapata first gained international recognition through photographs taken by

Mexican photographers and international photojournalists who recorded the events of the military phase of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920. Most who depict Zapata rely on actual photographs taken during this period, or on photographic reproductions of these photographs, while others rely on artistic illustrations based on these photographs.³ These photographs represent Zapata singly, but through their uses multiplied the meanings of the man.

A principal photographic image of Zapata is the portrait of Zapata standing next to a staircase at the Montezuma Hotel, located in the city of Cuernavaca, Morelos. Hugo Brehme, a German photographer, photographed Zapata at the hotel between 1911 and 1913.⁴ I believe this photographic image has become the most widely known and illustrated image of Zapata because it is the one above all others that captures essential characteristics of him, which made it ideal for circulation and incorporation into visual illustrations. In the portrait Zapata is self-assured and prepared. He is dressed in a charro's outfit with a set of bandoliers across his chest, he wears a large black mustache and broad brimmed sombrero. Zapata's characteristic, unflinching stare communicates his defiance. Zapata generates an impression of formidable strength and unquestioned leadership through his alert pose and matching gestures.

The photograph of "Zapata at the Moctezuma Hotel" was most likely first distributed as a "real photo" postcard, as Brehme circulated many of his images in postcard form.⁵ Images of the leaders of the Mexican Revolution were popular subjects. That Hugo Brehme joined the "Agencia Fotográfica Mexicana" and worked for its founder Agustín Víctor Casasola is significant to the history of this photographic portrait. Although Brehme took the photograph, Casasola inherited authorship of the portrait of Zapata, as we have come to know and recognize him today. Through his efforts many of the images of Zapata, as well as those of the Mexican Revolution were reprinted, reissued, and circulated throughout the world, as they continue to be

today. Through circulation, and later the incorporation of photographic portraits into works of art, these images had their symbolic visual references multiplied.

In my thesis I identify additional principal photographs of Zapata, which serve as the basis for many of the representations later created by various artists. These portraits are the basis for the visual language that envelops Zapata and have become the most common symbolic images of Zapata. I contextualize the photographs in terms of date and setting, Zapata's clothing is examined in terms of broader significance and range of effects. Modes of circulation for these images will also be weighed heavily in my analysis.

The Mexican graphic artist José Guadalupe Posada created a handful of illustrations of Zapata between 1910 and 1913. Posada lived between 1852-1913 and worked for the publisher Vanegas Arroyo for much of his career. Ironically, the 1912 broadsheet entitled "Zapata the Nuisance," is based on Brehme's favorable photographic portrait of Zapata at the Mocteczuma Hotel. The text of the broadsheet calls for extreme measures to defeat Zapata and reads: "Zapatismo is the very worst, his men are only bad seeds; the only punishment that they merit is a bullet each for their deeds."⁶ Without text, Posada's images of Zapata are perhaps more ambiguous and hardly negative representations. When placed within the context of a broadsheet, the image is impacted by the tone of the text, even as the image contradicts the negative implications of the text. Posada had no input as to the text that accompanied his images, which most likely came from Vanegas Arroyo.

The Mexican Mural Program plays a significant role in the construction of Mexican national identity and ideology. It is the first occasion since the Revolution, but not the last, that the government incorporates art making into public policy and attempts to harness it to promote their political ideology. This project is meant to complement the educational reforms enacted by

Obregón's administration, as well as to visually establish the institutionalization of the Revolution. Within the murals there was a new concerted effort to create a visual language that was easily readable, which resulted in the establishment of new symbols for Mexican history and art. Diego Rivera was an integral component to this development, and as such his work is crucial in the overall development of the meaning and symbolism attached to the image of Zapata. Diego Rivera depicted Zapata over 40 times throughout his career in paintings, drawings, prints, and mural cycles. All of these depictions evoke Zapata as the key representative of agrarian reform and revolutionary leadership. Murals were all located in public spaces, which ideally was meant to allow access to the masses. Rivera's fame and ultra-leftwing politics unquestionably inflected the way Zapata was interpreted in his murals and contributed to the broad interest in the Zapatistas.

The Taller de Gráfica Popular, or TGP, was founded in Mexico City in 1937. The *Estampas de la Revolución Mexicana* portfolio, produced by the TGP in 1947, consists of eighty-five prints that represent important figures and events associated with the Mexican Revolution.⁷ The portfolio thus illustrates episodes that the *TGP* artists felt at that time were the most important in the history of Mexico. Of significance to this project is the assigned role and meaning ascribed to Zapata within the context of this portfolio. These images have become part of the common visual vocabulary for the Mexican Revolution and national ideology.

The image in which Zapata last appears is Estampa 82, *La Prensa y La Revolución Mexicana* (or the Press and the Mexican Revolution) by Alfredo Zalce. The image is vertically split down the middle. The two figures on the left, both depicted with horrific facial features, are representative of the press. Above these figures appear to be loose and abstract pages of newspaper. Starting from the top of the right side we see four heads that represent, reading from

left to right, Obregon, Carranza, Zapata, and Madero. The heads appear to float within an agricultural crop. The emergence of armed marching revolutionary figures in campesinos costumes emerge from the vegetation at the bottom of the image.

The close assemblage of the four leaders suggests an alliance. The combination of title, text, and image enforce this alliance suggesting they shared a common position on the issue of freedom of the press. The presence of the vegetation and the revolutionary campesinos symbolically interjects the agrarian issue within the image. The manner in which the figures' heads are integrated within the vegetation suggests a uniform position on the issue of land rights and in relation to the campesinos. The suggestion of an alliance between the revolutionary leaders implies they share common ideological values, and was fighting together to achieve their goals.

In terms of each figure's position on the press, each had his own unique issues. Madero was a strong proponent in support of freedom of the press, even at the expense of his own reputation. During his presidency Madero was attacked and belittled by the press. Zapata's relationship with the press was a problematic one. The press, specifically in Mexico City, was engaged by the elite to criticize and defame Zapata, blaming him and his followers for every wrong doing that occurred in relation to activities in the south of Mexico, and labeling him the "Attila of the South."

Additionally, this is the representation of a non-existent alliance. Each of these individuals were leaders of different factions that took active part in the Mexican Revolution, their objectives remained dissimilar. A clause in Madero's Plan de San Luis Potosi, made Zapata hopeful that they would be able to join forces and work towards land reform. It became apparent to Zapata that this was not a priority and as Madero was unable to control Federal

forces under Huerta, who was on a mission to eliminate Zapata, broke with Madero. Obregon fought under Carranza and supported his efforts, but eventually there was a break between the two. Their position on agrarian reform differed. Lastly, Carranza was responsible for Zapata's murder, and any relationship between the two is one grounded in opposition. What is presented in this image is the institutionalization of the *la Revolución*, which involved the construction of a unified version of *la Revolución*. This was a project of the 1920s, which continued into the 40s.

Zapata is evoked both by his enemies and by his allies, by the press, by the Zapatistas of the Mexican Revolution, as well as those fighting in Chiapas, by the Mexican government, by scholars, by publishers, by artists and writers. Each group has thus contributed to the myth of Zapata. For me Zapata symbolizes my Mexican heritage, not simply because of what he attempted to accomplish, but because he is one of the few cultural artifacts that anchors me to this heritage. Instead of accepting Zapata as a mere factual figure I analyze why Zapata is important to us, to me. In this way I too hope to contribute to the evolving and transformative narrative of Zapata, and revivify his place in the present.

¡QUE VIVA ZAPATA!

ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas Benjamin 2000, 38 speaks similarly of the Mexican Revolution.

² In 1924 the Mexican Union of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors (SOTPE), whose members include Rivera and Siqueiros, published their manifesto. In this document artists made a commitment to creating art, "that makes people aware of their history and civil rights." Also within the manifest the native Indian of Mexico was identified as the, "symbol of the true Mexican." (See Azuela 1997, 251).

³ To clarify, within the realm of the photographic I include the photographic negative, the actual photographs made from the original negative; any photo mechanical reproductions; and all illustrations that stem from the original photographic image, such as: paintings, murals, sculptures, and images on various type of paraphernalia.

⁴ In his history of Mexican Photography Olivier Debrouse provides a brief biography of Brehme and his artistic efforts in Mexico:

[Brehme] opened a photographic studio in Mexico City in 1910 . . . In 1911, he joined the Agencia Fotográfica Mexicana founded by Agustín Casasola and participated in the photographic exploits of the Revolution. . . . Brehme came into contact with the Zapatistas in Morelos, where he made the now-celebrated portraits of Emiliano and Eufemio Zapata. . . . Brehme covered a large part of the Mexican Republic during the turbulent years of the Revolution, compiling a rich collection of negatives that he printed primarily in the form of the postcards.

Additionally, Brehme's photographs have an ambiguous nature in their portrayal of the landscape and people of Mexico, but the history from which his craft stems and the audience for whom the photographs are intended resonate with the tradition of the European traveler reporter. For a brief overview of the history of the European traveler reporters in the Americas see Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America* (Yale University Press, 1989): Chapter 3.I. For an in depth discussion of colonialist practices that were/are intertwined with the activities of the traveler reporter see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (Routledge, 1992/2000): Chapters 2-7. In Mexico Brehme's photographs generally dealt with the landscape and the people of Mexico. Figures are often times portrayed in "traditional" costumes or photographed within picturesque settings. His work seemingly documents the different "types" of people from different regions, which I associate with the tradition of scientific documentation employed by the traveler reporter. Brehme's photographs of individuals also harkens to "costumbrista" painting and "Romanticism." Both genres evoke colonization, constructed power structures, and derogatory stereotypes. See Pratt 2000, 137-138 for a discussion of "Romanticisms" role in colonization. Hugo Brehme's work is not necessarily a derogatory depiction of individuals, but rather the documentation of difference in regards to place and appearance, between the author, audience, and subject of the photograph. I contend that further research and analysis of Brehme's photographic work and intentions are necessary to better understand the nature of the photographs he took of Zapata and other "traditional" types in Mexico.

⁵ Although I have not seen a postcard with Brehme's portrait of Zapata, there are many postcards of the other Mexican Revolutionary leaders, including one of his brother Eufemio, which is part of the collection of the University of New Mexico's Center for Southwest Research at Zimmerman Library. The existence of these other postcards leads me to believe that it is very likely that postcards of Zapata, and specifically of Brehme's photographic portrait, would have been produced and circulated. In her discussion of Rivera's "Zapatista landscape," Linda Bank Downs makes reference to such a postcard of Zapata in her article "Viva Zapata!" *Art News* 98:6 (June 1999): 100-101.

⁶ Frank 1998, 226.

⁷ For an additional examination of the *Estampas de la Revolucion Mexicana* portfolio see Prignitz 1992, 113-123.