México: My, Your, Our Fantasy. The Problem of Flatness in Intercultural Representations of Mexicanidad

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Abstract

Representations of Mexicanidad are prolific in Europe and the Americas and, for the most part, they are "flat" lacking in depth, complexity or difference. Despite the promises of a globalized and connected world that would facilitate revealing the authentic, the globally representative and common visual culture that defines Mexicanidad is fixed. The increasingly competitive tourism, commercial, and entertainment industries play a primary role in concretizing a homogenous and colonial representation of the Mexican imaginary. Mexico continues to be colonized for mass cultural consumption. This paper explores a range of contemporary visual culture representations that articulate and define Mexicanidad in a narrow framework of identity construction and strategies of resistance as a response to this "flatness" in visual culture.

Mexico is a traveler's paradise, with a multitude of opposing identities: desert landscapes, snow-capped volcanoes, ancient ruins, teeming industrialized cities, time-warped colonial towns, glitzy resorts, lonely beaches and a world-beating collection of flora and fauna. This mix of modern and traditional is the key to Mexico's charm. (www.mexico.com).

Introduction

All my life I have been interested in visual culture. My parents, working in the US Foreign Service, would take my sister and I by the hand and we, with our suitcases we would go traveling around the regions we lived – on and off the beaten path through South East Asia, Latin America, and West Africa. This exposure to diverse visual landscapes at an early age was influential in shaping my worldview that is grounded in the contradictions between local, lived experiences and romanticized cultural representations. After studying and working in the fields

of political science and international development, I turned to the study and practice of graphic design, a field where we are charged with the construction of visual culture. To some extent allied with advertising and mass media, we are, in my opinion, inherently social and political. While the discipline continues to evolve, the academic study of design–the study of the processes, implications, user needs, and the larger global visual culture–is still in its nascent stages. To complicate matters, tension exists between the designers in practice and those in the academy, the latter who tend to be more critical of the former. This paper explores this tension.

When I began writing this paper one of my anthropology colleagues said to me "…the problem you have here is that you actually believe that Mexico exists." He knew of my interest in peeling back the many layers and influences that result in the "imaginary of México" to expose the everyday, and thus posed the crucial philosophical question of how can one ever get to the "real" or the "authentic?" In every attempt it seems we proceed down, or up as the case may be, a slippery slope. Is it all simulacra? Or is it all "authentic," even if imagined and constructed?

Thus, contemplating these questions in relation to representation of Mexicanidad, I explore a range of contemporary visual culture representations that articulate and define Mexico. There is a desire to define it – as evidenced in tourism promotion (advertising, architecture, souvenirs), and the marketing of Mexican restaurants, for example. I am concerned with identifying discrete parts of the common visual language used to define a place and people–one that simulates the experience of being "there." To understand the origins of this landscape, I rely on the literature on Mexicanidad (Bartra & Hall, 1992; Cooper, 1992) and employ a semiotic methodology to analyze visual representations (Barthes, 1972). Finally, I define possible alternate strategies – strategies of resistance – as a response to this "flatness" in visual culture.

México just might be the most stereotyped country in the west. Originating as a Mexican nationalist project to build a modern nation-state with a cohesive national identity, the post-revolutionary Mexican government embraced the Aztec and Maya civilizations. This had the effect of building a culture of assimilation suggesting common roots, and immediately tied the population to a pre-conquest history. This practice continues today in extensive tourism campaigns, put forth by the Mexican government and Mexican national and international commercial interests. Contemporary promotional material tends to stimulate a desire to purchase "authentic" and dramatic experiences. Never wanting to be tourists, we are easy prey as travelers in search of the real, or at least something more exciting than our everyday lives. This tourism marketing strategy is particularly meaningful to the visitors from the United States, where we are lacking in an exotic and romantic history – one filled with drama and always larger than life.

Contemporary marketing of México relies on tightly woven yet rhizomatic threads to provide structure to the whole. Even before one arrives in Mexico, one receives "information"

from various different resources and through diverse mediums (television, print advertisements, the internet, popular magazines) that create a perception of a place. Thus, one expects to experience the same or similar when one arrives on site—what is constructed in mass media representations must simultaneously be constructed or performed on site. These constructions and performances cut vertically through the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. Products are produced, distributed, and consumed based on ubiquitous signifiers: tequila, the sleeping Mexican, Frida Kahlo, Maya and Aztec pyramids, the mariachi, the macho, telenovelas, and beautiful beaches. These work in collusion to connote the exotic, historical, mythical, and often naïve, imaginary.

Mexico is either an object of desire or a laughable, sympathetic cartoon. Representations isolated from context become naturalized in western visual culture through repetition. Such representations of Mexicanidad are essentially "flat" – without depth, complexity, or difference. It would seem there is nothing between the exotic and the cartoon. We are left then with a discrete set of signifiers that cut across cultures and intercultural spaces to define and communicate the "essence" of a place and its peoples. How and why do they function to form one or multiple wholes or "realities" so to speak?

What may now be considered "narrow" representations of Mexicanidad were first uttered to support a broader agenda of building a unified national character, indexical of a "modern" nation. "…México, in nineteenth-century world's fairs shared Europe's orientalist and exoticist concerns and in turn undertook an 'autoethnography.' It fed the hunger of these exhibitions for exotic objects and people. México thus offered indigenous food and drink, dresses and tipos populares (popular characters) at the fairs…" (Tenorio-Trillo, 1996, p. 7). The world's fairs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries became places to exhibit the multitude of resources a country possessed and could offer up for consumption – the raw materials, science and technology, history, culture, people, both the tangible and imaginary, as showcases of national pride and progress and ultimately providing a logic for investment in national economies. In the building of México as a nation state after the Mexican Revolution of 1920, appropriation of indigenous historical lineage was paramount to create a continuous thread of national culture and, as Bartra points out, forms an "irrational type of social cohesion" (Bartra & Hall, 1992, p. 3) – one that is not logical or natural but constructed. Selling México – politically, economically, socially – relies on controlled production and manipulation of Mexicanidad (Cooper, 1997, p. 152).

As tourism, commercial, media, and entertainment industries become increasingly competitive, so do the strategies and tactics required to engage the public. These industries have played a major role in shaping and concretizing the contemporary homogenous and ancient/colonial representation of the Mexican imaginary. Common tropes that originated decades ago are embedded in a universally common language that speaks to us of México. It is

the movement across space, place, and time of the stereotypes, the rhetorics, the imaginary of Mexico that, in their simplicity and repetition, become concretized in the mind. In essence, the representation of Mexico, and indeed places in Mexico, continue to be colonized for mass cultural consumption. What this colonization implies then is that the image of México becomes perpetually positioned in the past – the future has yet to be invented.

These representations are narrow because they are memetic – they rely on appropriation and repetition of tropes, within, between and across cultures to constantly (re)define, with the same definition, and create a sense of desire for what is Mexican. They build on a nationalist agenda and depict the colors, textures, food, customs and culture of indigenous people (who are a link to the past at the same time they are not of the past). The representations are sensual, alluring, romantic, nostalgic, and divorced from the present. They recreate the past over and over again – they create one México that is a simple and exotic place. It is through spatial and temporal repetition that these tropes are naturalized. To deconstruct one manifestation (advertisement, website, souvenir) in this rhizomatic system offers opportunities for observations that are applicable to the system.

México on the web

The official web site of México's tourism board, the Consejo de Promoción Turística de México, is www.visitmexico.com. It presents destinations, activities, events, and "unique experiences" one may encounter to both attract and inform visitors to Mexico (Figure 1). Between 2004 and 2005, the website was redesigned and grew to include information in seven languages. While the overall organization of the website and visual language has not changed, there are subtle differences in the presentation of images and the redesign of the home page and the new website provides more utilities for the user (Figure 3). Both follow contemporary western web design standards in structure, hierarchy, and aesthetics, the latter of which, due to software innovations and the growing pains of formal realization in new media, are always in a state of change. This is a large, information-based website designed for a global audience with a range of interests. Websites of this nature differ from boutique sites because they rely on a complex database structure to control information dynamically. In order to do so, the website is dependent on a thoughtful yet controlled structure whose parameters are, at least at this writing, less expressive than smaller websites where pages may be individually manipulated. The consistency of this website allows for variation in the information in order to dynamically generate information on each of its 32 states, selected cities, and tourist destinations. The analysis presented here focuses primarily on the 2004 website (Figures 1 and 2) yet presents the current website as a point of comparison (Figures 3 and 4).

The main title on both websites is placed in the upper left hand corner of the screen, a web standard, locates the viewer in cyberspace. Following the popular adage of "many

Mexicos," there are many Mexicos represented here through text and image. The logotype "Mexico" at the top left, consistent on all pages to fix the location, is formally of bold weight, uppercase, and patterned with a colorful zigzag often found on rugs, and blankets associated with North American Native American cultures, of which Mexico is one. The pattern connotes playfulness as it makes its way through the letterforms, expressing formal continuity and the use of uppercase letterforms represents strength and stability. In contrast, the revised representation on the 2005 website simplifies the use of pattern, now subtler and black on vibrantly colored letters reinforced by the website's color palette, also slightly more vibrant than that of the past year, emphasizes the details and subtleties. In this example (Figure 3), the "e" is now lowercase with an accent, thus connoting an informal and relaxed presence. Each of these typographic representations for our reading of the nation was made to be to be simultaneously playful, modern, historic, and exotic.

The second representation of "Mexico" lies in an image in the content field area that changes based on where the visitor is on the site–or in Mexico. For example, while "Mexico" appears on the home page, if one clicks on a destination button, that region or city appears in its place. Both appear in white text floating over the primary image. The first (Figure 3) is calligraphic and, as such, is reminiscent of the Spanish colonial heritage and the handmade, is sensual and ethereal, and connotes the non-western aspects of Mexico. The 2005 version, elevates this secondary representation to a western context, using a traditional European serif typeface – a normative typeface used to express stability, it is western and classic. One reads the words before one "sees" the nuances of the form. Thus, there is a shift from one year to the next in depicting Mexico – the former traditional and the current website evokes a modern, western country. Neither of these evokes the visual vernacular, hybridity or diversity that one sees in Mexico – what may be considered other reasons to visit or experiences one will have while experiencing everyday life.

Returning to analysis of the 2004 website, the images are sophisticated, saturated, romantic, and ethereal. Compositions rely on a variety of angles to provoke movement and yet position what is monumental, such as El Castillo at Chichen Itzá, on a solid horizontal foundation that communicates stability. Upon entering the home page of visitmexico.com, the user is immediately introduced to an expert on México. For example, Fernando de Buen, a graphic designer, shares with us his interpretation of the photograph we see – which we substitute for the place itself : " …the magenta hue of the sky reflecting the setting sun with the cool bubbling aqua waters of the sea makes for a surreal experience." (www.visitmexico.com, 2004) It is in this example that we find a reflexivity between the photograph and the text. They reinforce each other precisely because they are the same–we are being told twice–but it is with the text that we are, as Barthes indicated in "The Fashion System" (Barthes, 1972), given the context around the image that closes our interpretation. Each state or zone has its own

constructed and unique identity manifested in advertising language. For example, Yucatán is the state of Maya heritage–manifested through photographs and statements on the state's home page including "Chichen Itza: the city created by the Gods: and "Chichen Itza: the splendorous Maya culture." (www.visitmexico.com, 2004) (Figure 2) On this page, there are no people, it is the history of Yucatán that is in the foreground. Presumably contemporary culture is not as interesting or unique as the archeological heritage sites or legends and myths. It is only when the user clicks to move a little deeper into the site, that the people, the contemporary culture, including the regional dance known as the Jarana, become visible. What is noticeably absent is the kitsch or popular culture representations such as the sombrero or the sleeping Mexican, although this seeps through in photographs of the Mariachis in Guadalajara. While this is arguably a more visually and culturally "sophisticated" representation of place and identity, it builds on historic threads through its use of color and selection of images. A radical departure from this historic foundation would not be good for business–shifting expectations that have relied on relatively stable symbolic communication for the past 100 years.

Tourism, and how we consume the world, is an increasingly visual activity. The literature on tourism studies points out that how people respond to a place and people is often prescribed by existing representations of that place or one similar. (Cooper, 1997) In essence, before we leave home our expectations have already been created by the confluence of postcards, advertisements, television programs, tourism literature, etc. We enter the experience seeking to replicate these representations that allow us to feel both excited and comfortable traveling. It creates a sense of desire and a sense of escape. The representation of the thing is not the thing itself and the real is burdened with practical considerations. Recent high un and under employment in some southern Mexican states has caused people to migrate to work in the growing tourism industry of the Mexican Caribbean, also known as the Maya Riviera. In presuming disappointment if the imaginary is not discovered in the actual, great effort goes into trying to match the experience. Examples of these are played out over and over again in light shows, at theme parks such as Xcaret, in cities such as Playa del Carmen, a resort city with the highest urban growth rate in Mexico, the beach is constantly swept–both literally and figuratively. It is swept of trash every morning and it is swept during the day of ambulantes (itinerant vendors) so as to maintain a peaceful, pristine environment that one comes to expect. This place is made for escape. Even when one is approached on the beach by ambulantes, it is usually by a Maya woman from Chiapas, dressed in 'traditional' clothing. Her image is the contemporary parallel to the stereotypes of the lazy Mexican campesino seen on signs (restaurants, products, etc.) and objects (salt and pepper shakers, knick knacks, book ends, etc.) available at tourist stalls in Mexico and flea markets later. "Peasants are in the habit of casting a long shadow of nostalgia and melancholy over modern society. They are the survivors of a period that must never return." (Bartra & Hall, 1992, p. 17) In tourist cities in Mexico we find

our expectations met through the imaginary that echoes Mexico's past, as it was used for post-revolutionary nation building. Today, these signifiers are appropriated by commercial enterprises in another attempt to nation build. The boundaries between the commercial, social, political and economic are blurred if not already erased.

Strategies of Resistance

We would perhaps expect that this image would change, that we would somehow become more enlightened as a result of education, globalization and personal experiences that presumably offers some of us–well heeled consumers at least–the opportunity to know and experience "more" (of the "real," the "authentic," or the complexity) of the "Other." However, there has been little to alter the now globally representative and common tropes that constitute Mexicanidad. In fact, it can be argued, that the inverse happens – that through mass media representations, these monolithic tropes in the popular sphere are magnified.

The image is a fictional representation of the thing at that moment. In many cases, it has been distilled and flattened so it is ready for rapid consumption. In the arguments made by so many working in gender studies, where representations of women with perfect bodies, hair, makeup, and lives influence the way women perceive themselves, what effect do these representations have on the subject? I pose this as a question to myself as a topic for another study, but wonder if and how the representation of Mexicanidad is reflexive? Does it turn the imaginary back on itself and presuppose that this is what Mexican culture is and should be? What relationship then does this have, if any, to the daily lives specifically to those whose daily lives have a relationship to the tourist industry? Intellectually, as much as we care to think about it, we do know that México is much more than the commodified tourist subject and object. We do know that its complexity extends well beyond such advertisements as this one for FUNJET, a charter vacation company, declaring 'this place is so beautiful, you would think it was made by the Gods.' (FunJet, 2003.)

What are the strategies of resistance? Or, why should we and how do we move beyond the stereotype? Do the graphic vernacular representations form a kind of resistance to the appropriation of Mexican culture by large national and international enterprises? Is their commodification any more representative? Is the popular itself a form of resistance – in that it not only resists an imposed identity but manifests the hybrid culture of México? In many ways, México is no different from other places in the world. To return to my colleague's comment that "the problem is you believe Mexico exists" I believe the essence of this question is not predicated on our resistance to the notion of a place called Mexico. It is, after all, a practiced place where people have agency. Rather this is based on a desire for both an escape from our own complex lives and search for an elusive object of desire. Does this then result in the a desire

for simplicity? To travel to a place where we don't have to work to understand difference because we already know the imaginary?

As a designer, who might someday undertake similar projects of representation, these and other questions require critical analysis in terms of design (and art, marketing, advertising, and communication) studies and pedagogy. How do we allow for multivocality and resist flatness? In peeling back the layers of representation, can we find an alternative? I believe so. In Daniel Alarcon Cooper's book The Aztec Palimpsest (1997), he suggests that Mexico is itself a palimpsest – with layers upon layers that are continually being reinvented but always allowing us to see what is beneath if we choose to look. The issue of representation is complex and is not, and can never be, divorced from the larger social, economic, political, and cultural issues–of a country, of the world. Design historian Victor Margolin writes "the relation between graphic expression and cultural identity is strongly stated even though the varied examples of ethnic representation have no formal ideological unity" (1999, p. 3). Visual culture, specifically forms of graphic design and advertising, educates, informs, and persuades. There is inherent power in this practice and in order to reveal its ideologies it must also be critically analyzed, semiotically or through other theoretical operations, so that the structure can be understood and alternatives can be developed. If we consider, as Garcia Canclini does, that "in consumption, the popular sectors are always at the end of the process, as addressees, spectators obligated to reproduce the cycle of capital and the ideology of the dominator" (Canclini, 1994, p. 145) how can we speak truth to power?

Beyond education in the classroom, a probable strategy is to seek to do a kind of fieldwork that involves direct contact with the subject and the user, as a critical-thinking component of a student's education. This also requires shifting the points of power to allow for experimentation and alternative ways of thinking, of describing, or representing – to explore the "constant interaction of the local with national and transnational networks of communication" (Canclini, 1995, p. 207)

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Figures:
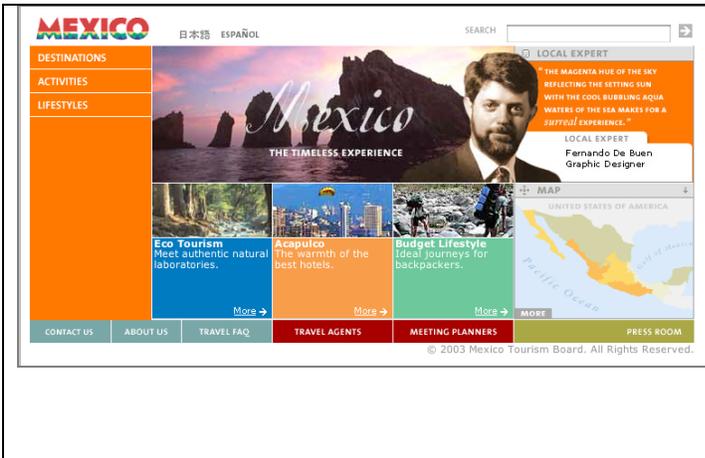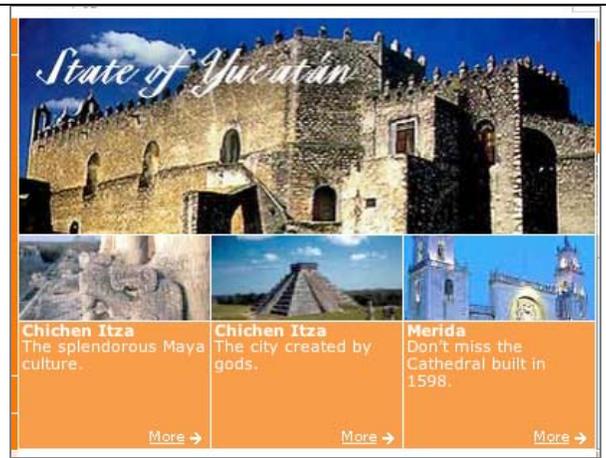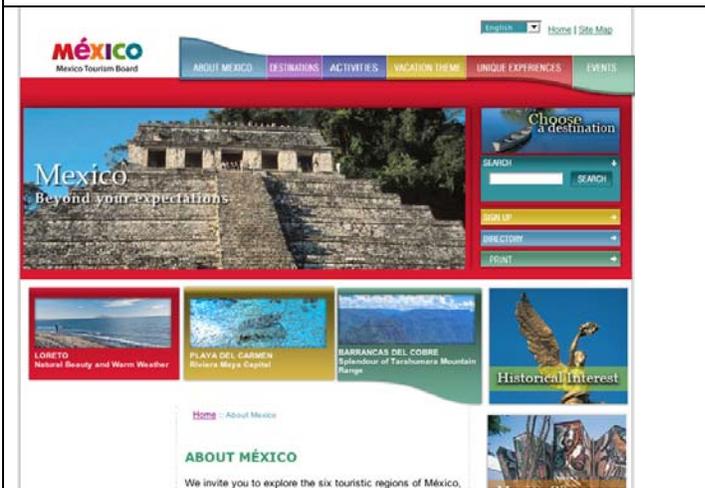
| Figure 1. Homepage for the website www.visitmexico.com. July 2004. | Figure 2. Second-level page for the website www.visitmexico.com. July 2004. |

| Figure 3. Homepage for the website www.visitmexico.com. May 2005. | Figure 4. Second-level page for the website www.visitmexico.com. May 2005. |